

# As Florida's legislative session begins today, here are the water bills we're watching

From seagrass to sewage, Florida lawmakers are proposing a variety of water-specific bills this year.

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There's no shortage of water issues Florida lawmakers could attempt to tackle as the state's [legislative session](#) kicks off today.

Seagrass is declining across the state, from [Tampa Bay](#) to the Indian River Lagoon; manatees have [died recently in record numbers](#) as their ecosystem degrades; an ongoing red tide is leaving tons of dead fish scattered on popular Southwest Florida beaches; and polluted Lake Okeechobee freshwater discharges threaten coastal estuaries.

The legislative session is slated to run through May 5. Here's a list of some of the water-specific bills proposed by Florida legislators this year that we'll be watching

**Title:** [Land and Water Management](#)

One of the most controversial water bills of the 2023 session, this measure would prohibit counties and municipalities from adopting laws about water quality or quantity, pollution control and wetlands. It would preempt those measures exclusively to the state, and could withhold state funds to local governments if they violate the rule. It has been largely decried by Florida environmental groups who claim the bill would ["inevitably lead to dirtier water."](#) The sponsors are Sen. Danny Burgess, R-Zephyrhills, and Rep. Randy Maggard, R-Dade City.

**Title:** [Safe Waterways Act](#)

Want to know whether the water you're about to swim in is impaired by fecal

bacteria? The Safe Waterways Act would improve transparency and alert the public when beaches, canals and intracoastal waters are contaminated. When high levels of bacteria are documented, health advisory signs would be required. The measure would also create a statewide database of dirtied waters. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Lori Berman, D-Boynton Beach, and Rep. Peggy Gossett Seidman, R-Highland Beach.

**Title:** [Implementation of the Recommendations of the Blue-Green Algae Task Force](#)

In 2019, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis tapped five water quality experts to help solve Florida's blue-green algae problem. The group came up with a list of ideas to help – but only a handful of those ideas have been fully adopted at the state level. This bill, sponsored by Tampa Bay area Rep. Lindsay Cross, D-St. Petersburg, would implement a statewide septic inspection program and bolster pollution-reducing measures.

**Title:** [Management and Storage of Surface Waters](#) This bill would exempt some environmental restoration practices from regulation on certain government-owned and agricultural lands. Designated landowners could alter their land, for instance, if it results “in a net increase” in wetland function. The measure would change the state law that oversees the management and storage of surface waters, or waterbodies like rivers, lakes and wetlands. An exemption will no longer require a written notice. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Colleen Burton, R-Lakeland, and Rep. Sam Killebrew, R-Winter Haven.

**Title:** [Seagrass Restoration](#)

With [recent declines](#), seagrass is a hot issue in Tampa Bay and across the state. This bill would create a “Seagrass Restoration Technology Development Initiative” within the Florida Department of Environmental Protection — a partnership between Mote Marine Laboratory and the University of Florida to expedite technology for seagrass restoration. It would also require a 10-year seagrass restoration plan and receive \$2 million annually. It's sponsored by Sen. Jim Boyd, R-Bradenton, and Rep. William Robinson Jr., R-Bradenton.

**Title:** [Flood Disclosures for Real Property Sales](#)

Hurricane Ian's September landfall once again proved just how vulnerable Florida properties are to flooding. This proposed bill would require a property seller to disclose to possible buyers, in writing, flooding risk factors, like whether the property has flooded in the past and whether the property is located in a flood-risk area. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Jennifer Bradley, R-Fleming Island, and Rep. Susan Valdés, D-Tampa.

**Title:** [Notice of Contaminated Water Systems](#)

If you've ever been under a boil-water notice when the water supply is at risk of contamination, how did you find out? This bill would require the Florida Department of Health and its agents to require water suppliers to send public text messages when water becomes contaminated. The notice would include the date of contamination, how contaminated the water has become and the date potable water is restored. The bill is sponsored by Rep. Jervonte "Tae" Edmonds, D-West Palm Beach.

**Title:** [Wastewater Grants](#)

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection keeps a running list of the "impaired" waterbodies in the state that are in need of restoration. This bill would expand the department's [Wastewater Grant Program](#) to include waters on that list. In Tampa Bay, that includes the Hillsborough River Basin, the Tampa Bay Basin, Alafia River and others. It's sponsored by Sen. Ana Maria Rodriguez, R-Doral, and Rep. Fabián Basabe, R-Miami Beach.

**Title:** [Office of the Blue Economy](#)

If turned into law, this bill would create the "Office of the Blue Economy" in Florida. The measure defines a blue economy as "economic uses of ocean and coastal resources," including maritime industries like shipyards, marinas, fishing and aquaculture. It would require a biennial assessment of the maritime industry's historic and current contributions to the state's economy. The office would be within the Department of Economic Opportunity. It's sponsored by Sen. Jason Pizzo, D-Hollywood, and Rep. Kelly Skidmore, D-Boca Raton.

**Title:** [Water and Wastewater Facility Operators](#)

If a wastewater facility operator has received a license by the federal government or another state, this bill would authorize the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to issue licenses to them in Florida. The bill would also allow the department to issue temporary operator licenses during a declared state of emergency. It's sponsored by Sen. Jay Collins, R-Tampa, and Rep. Melony Bell, R-Fort Meade.

**Title:** [Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal System Inspections](#)

This measure would direct the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to administer periodic inspections of onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems. The inspections would apply to systems that are more than 5 years old, and would call for an inspection once every five years. It's sponsored by Michael Caruso, R-Delray Beach.

**Title:** [Public Financing of Potentially At-Risk Structure and Infrastructure](#)

This bill aims to add sea-level rise to current legislation that monitors sea level's impact on coastal building zones. It would clarify that areas "at risk due to sea level rise" are any locations projected to be below the threshold for tidal flooding within the next 50 years, based on federal data. It also adds erosion as a factor that puts infrastructure at risk. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Alexis Calatayud, R-Miami, and Rep. Christine Hunschofsky, D-Parkland.

**Title:** [Outstanding Florida Springs](#)

Warm Mineral Springs, a peaceful spring in Sarasota County, would be added to the state's list of "Outstanding Florida Springs." The list includes springs throughout the state that are in need of extra protections, and bolstered water quality initiatives. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Joe Gruters, R-Sarasota.

**Title:** [Excise Tax on Water Extracted for Commercial or Industrial Use](#)

If extractors want to take from Florida's rivers, lakes, springs, wetlands or other waters for industrial or commercial use, they would be taxed at a rate of \$0.001 per gallon under this measure. The proceeds of the tax would fund the [Water Protection and Sustainability Program Trust Fund](#). The bill is sponsored by Sen.

Linda Stewart, D-Orlando.

**Title:** [Residential Graywater System Tax Credits](#)

This measure would provide a tax credit to developers and homebuilders for certain graywater systems purchased during the taxable year. Graywater usually means wastewater from baths and sinks and it typically doesn't contain the usual contaminants found in toilet wastewater. The sponsors are Sen. Danny Burgess, R-Zephyrhills, and Rep. James Buchanan, R-Osprey.

**Title:** [Pollutant Load Reduction](#)

Florida environment regulators have pollution roadmaps called Basin Management Action Plans that are intended to clean up local waterways. This bill would amend the planning process for these roadmaps to prioritize projects "that are most likely to achieve the maximum pollutant reductions." The bill would also require a prioritization of advanced waste treatment and lay the groundwork for the [Indian River Lagoon Protection Program](#). It's sponsored by Rep. Kevin Steele, R-Dade City.

**Title:** [Biosolids](#)

If passed, this bill would allow the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to dole out grants within a wastewater grant program for projects that convert wastewater into biosolids. A biosolid is organic matter made from the sewage-cleaning process that can be used for natural processes like fertilizing. The bill is sponsored by Sen. Jason Brodeur, R-Lake Mary, and Rep. Kaylee Tuck, R-Lake Placid.

***Know of a water-specific bill we should be monitoring? Reach out to [mchesnes@tampabay.com](mailto:mchesnes@tampabay.com)***