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FEATURES

Down Goes the Discharge

June 4, 2024 Dori Zinn





Lake Okeechobee is the largest freshwater lake in Florida and is discharging billions of gallons of polluted water that eventually lands in the Everglades, Intracoastal and Atlantic Ocean. This discharge has lasting harmful impacts on our waters, our sea life and us.



Fort Lauderdale's prized beaches are enjoyed by locals and tourists alike. Year-round, we get to enjoy our toes in the sand. But our beaches and waterways haven't been looking as pristine as they once did.

That's because coastal water runoffs from Lake Okeechobee and other places are causing massive destruction to our ecosystem. Jeff Maggio, 55, has lived in South Florida for most of his life. Captain Jeff owns Lunker Dog and is a licensed captain and vocal advocate for our local beaches and Intracoastal.

"It'll be salty water one day and if water gets too high, they open up the gates and it turns totally fresh," he says. "That big swing kills everything." And "everything" isn't an exaggeration.

"The fish population between here and Stuart is down [by] like 90% in the last five to six years," Maggio says. "We've hit critical mass at this point, and it's totally failing."

The problem with discharge



When Lake Okeechobee gets too high from rainfall, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers discharges water from Lake O. There are good intentions around this — with lower lake levels, we avoid overflowing. So discharges occur, especially before the rainy summer and hurricane season.

While it sounds good in theory, the drastic change harms sea life.

“Nothing can live in it. It’s fresh one day, salt the next,” Maggio says, noting that the Miami Waterkeeper tests the Intracoastal Waterway and other locations. Seventy percent of the locations fail those tests.

“Because of that, the water is toxic,” he says. “That means we can’t get in it or eat what’s in it. People are getting MRSA and staph infections because the water is so polluted.”

The water is toxic because of the harsh switch from saltwater to freshwater and the pollution coming from Lake O. Ongoing development in South Florida also causes pollution of our waterways.

“Every time we build a new neighborhood, they dam it up,” Maggio says. “They let it loose when it gets too high. So the ecosystem starts to fail. It’s never-ending.”

The water from Lake Okeechobee is nutrient-rich and polluted, causing blue-green algae to take the oxygen out of the seawater, harming oysters and other sea life. The algae is toxic and has been known to intensify red tide blooms, which leads to massive marine kills.

The downfall continues



While Lake O discharges are happening right now, this isn’t the first time we’ve experienced them.

In 2018, Lake Okeechobee discharges created toxic and lasting effects in and on our waters. Folks couldn’t get in the water, let alone eat from it. Seagrasses, oysters, turtles, manatees, sharks and millions more marine life-forms were destroyed.

For months in the summer of 2018, water was flushed out of Lake Okeechobee, down

canals, and into the Intracoastal and Atlantic Ocean. Fort Lauderdale isn't the only area that saw major repercussions — Florida's west coast also witnessed devastating results. An impact study from the University of Florida found that the 2018 discharges led to roughly \$184 million in tourism losses. Charters declined dramatically where red tide was present, and real estate values tanked.

The 2018 incident wasn't the only one; discharges created lasting negative impacts in 2016 and 2013 as well. These harmful flows have been happening for more than a decade.

A slight mix of saltwater and freshwater is normal and even encouraged, as that's been happening for centuries. Hundreds of years have shown how when Lake O was full, it would overflow and naturally spread freshwater to the salty Atlantic Ocean, encouraging our Everglades to thrive.

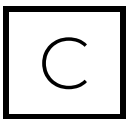
But too much of it has caused more harm than good. Artificial draining and redirection began when we started to increase construction and building in the way of those natural occurrences. Homes and businesses now sit on land that was once part of a budding ecosystem. That means the redirection is harming places where massive amounts of water shouldn't be.

"It's nothing like we've ever seen before," Maggio says. "We've always seen deterioration because of overdevelopment and there's nothing we can do about it. It really crushes the ecosystem."



© 2016 New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Photo by Shirokoff/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

What happens if this continues?



aptains for Clean Water, a nonprofit that works to restore and protect our waterways, was formed in 2016 after a few fishing guides got fed up with

failing water management practices and how harmful these issues have been to our community. With science-based efforts and solutions, Captains for Clean Water encourages residents to hold elected officials accountable for creating and maintaining a realistic set of solutions for clean water.

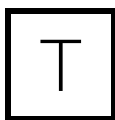
Aside from the massive ecological impacts, Fort Lauderdale and South Florida can see other significant influences on our economy, health and ways of life.

Economically, harmful water quality can cost billions in commercial and recreational fishing, real estate values, outdoor recreation and local economic output. Plummeting tourism alone can cost billions in lost revenue. Florida relies heavily on tourism, which generates more than \$40 billion in economic impact each year and is the state's largest source of income. A fall in tourism can devastate our economy.

Blue-green algae and red tide aren't just harmful to fish and sea life; they also harm humans. Contaminated waters can cause skin irritations at best and respiratory and long-term health issues at worst. Consuming contaminated seafood harms humans and pets and can lead to other health-related issues.

Our way of life is also impacted. When the water turns brown and dirty, both tourists and residents avoid Fort Lauderdale's beaches. We find alternatives to boating, fishing and other coastal activities when we can't be in and around the water.

Can we do anything to change it?



The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan — a massive restoration plan to help manage excess flow from Lake Okeechobee south through the Everglades and beyond — is one big step toward solving and managing South Florida's water quality crisis.

The revival of the Everglades addresses the artificial ditches and dams that have harmed our waterways and focuses on water storage, treatment and conveyance.

Folks from Captains for Clean Water and other organizations are working hard to make long-lasting changes at the local and state levels. But it's also up to us, as citizens, to create and implement change.

Jeff Maggio is worried that we aren't doing enough. "You'd think people in Florida, the one thing they'd care about is the water," he says. "I just don't see it happening. People need to get their heads out of the sand and realize that if we don't make a big deal about it, we're going to have polluted water forever."

If we aren't worried about these issues right now, why should our officials care? The good news is that once we know better, we can do better. In Fort Lauderdale, Maggio says we can encourage our local officials in small and big ways. For instance, having living seawalls instead of cement seawalls.

"[The city is] going to replace [the seawalls] in the next few years because water is getting so high," Maggio says. "Instead of replacing them with cement, we can put in living seawalls, which promotes life. We've gone to the city with this, but for whatever reason they don't implement them and go about it the same old way."

Last year, Fort Lauderdale Mayor Dean Trantalis launched the "Fortify Lauderdale" initiative, which focuses on rising sea levels and high tides. The \$500 million project aims to improve the resiliency of many of Fort Lauderdale's most vulnerable communities. Improving local drainage systems is essential, and after last April's massive storm that dropped two feet of water on the city, we can only hope these changes help avoid major flooding in the future.

While this is one initiative, we can press for and encourage additional changes to avoid living like this. Ongoing runoff and sewage spills from area construction have major and long-term impacts on our waterways.

Dr. Nancy Gassman, the City of Fort Lauderdale's assistant public works director for sustainability, says most runoff from Lake Okeechobee is directed east through the St. Lucie Estuary or west through the Caloosahatchee. So Fort Lauderdale doesn't see direct impacts from this discharge.

"In the past, these discharges have caused concerns for blue-green algal blooms on the east coast and red tide impacts on the Gulf coast," Dr. Gassman says. "While the City of Fort Lauderdale receives discharge directed south through the North New River Canal, I am currently not aware of any concerns with nutrient impacts on the city's beaches."

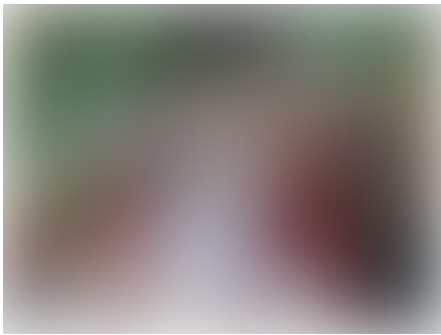
It's important to remember that lasting change doesn't happen overnight. The more we work on bettering Fort Lauderdale for residents and visitors, the longer those positive changes will ripple through our — hopefully clean — waters in the future.

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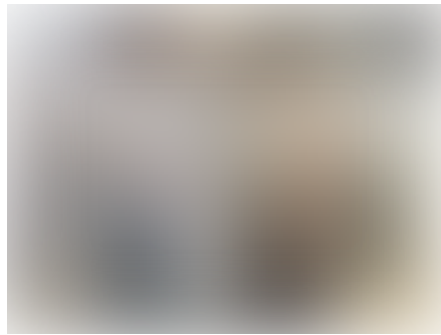
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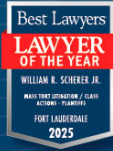


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