



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

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What is the subject/title of the entry? Environmental Hurricane

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Is your newspaper under 50,000 circulation or above 50,000 circulation? Under

Please give a brief explanation of issues discussed and the results achieved. (This space will expand as you type in your comments.)

An environmental disaster of unprecedented scale swept Southwest Florida in the summer of 2018 and Lee County was landfall for that environmental hurricane.

Lee County's shorelines and beaches saw dead fish by the literal ton as well as dead manatees, dolphins, sea turtles, Goliath grouper and even a 26-foot whale shark due to the worst on-shore outbreak of red tide ever.

Canals in Cape Coral were slimed pea-soup green with an algae called cyanobacteria, resulting in fish kills and dead manatees in the Caloosahatchee River.

While not the sole cause, nutrient-heavy, algae-laden discharges from Lake Okeechobee took much of the blame for the shore-to-shore pea-green "blooms" of toxic fish-killing cyanobacteria both here and on the east coast of Florida along and

around the St. Lucie River.

The discharges also were cited as a major contributory cause that fed the toxin-producing *Karenia brevis*, the organism that makes up red tide.

The Cape Coral Breeze, and our sister newspapers on Fort Myers Beach and the islands of Sanibel, Captiva and Pine Island, covered the story and its various aspects extensively: Breaking news and hard news updates, environmental and economic impacts, local government and public outcry, the state vs federal blame game and subsequent solutions proffered.

We also addressed these issues on our editorial pages with nearly a dozen editorials plus guest columns and cartoons calling for funding and corrective actions long promised and long overdue.

The Breeze was not alone; this was a story that went national. The collective media effort resulted in a number of actions, some approved, some still pending:

In October of 2018, President Trump signed the bipartisan Water Resources Development Act, a \$6 billion conglomeration of projects including many key to correcting - and so ultimately preventing - the water quality calamity that not only left beaches from Marco Island to Tampa awash with dead sea life but wreaked havoc on our tourism-based economy. The communities of Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel had suffered an estimated loss of \$41 million in the months of July and August alone.

The act advanced 68 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan projects that had been previously approved, including authorization of the EAA Southern Storage Reservoir intended to mitigate flows west and east through the rivers by providing storage for Lake O overflow during the rainy season. (The state previously had approved the construction of the reservoir to store and treat water, so it can then flow naturally south, in 2017.)

The action was in addition to \$206 million appropriated by the House, with a total of \$610 million to be set aside to complete the Herbert Hoover Dike repairs by 2022 instead of the end of the decade.

Efforts ultimately led to \$115 million being set aside for Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan in the FY2019 budget with a total of nearly \$1.1 billion appropriated for dike repairs and restoration projects this fiscal year and next.

Meanwhile, in February, newly elected Gov. Ron DeSantis unveiled his \$91.3 billion "Bold Vision for a Brighter Future" budget proposal, earmarking more than \$4 billion for his environment, agriculture and natural resources component, including \$1.9 billion for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

That budget included \$625 million per year for Everglades restoration and protection, a proposed tally of \$2.5 billion by the end of his first term.

That proposal included \$360 million for Everglades restoration projects, including two reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas and 20 additional projects over the next five

years to reduce not only the discharges to the rivers but treatment to remove total phosphorus, a major source of nutrient pollution and a contributory cause of the algal blooms.

With the fear of an environmental repeat on many minds and the heat still on, the governor got most of what he asked for this legislative session.

To emphasize the new mindset, Gov. DeSantis also asked for the resignations of the entire South Florida Water Management Board, appointed by his predecessor, now U.S. Sen. Rick Scott.

The bottom line is correction and mitigation projects developed, proposed and approved over the course of nearly two decades are finally getting funded.

It only took carcasses by the literal ton washed on on area beaches to get results.

Weigh in on water quality policies

Saying they are tired of the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers being treated as Florida's latrine, three environmental groups on Wednesday announced they will sue multiple federal agencies for their failure to recognize the effects pollutant-laden water discharges from Lake Okeechobee have on red tide.

"Even as the Red Tide wreaks havoc, the Corps keeps treating Florida's rivers like a toilet," said Jaclyn Lopez, Florida director for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the entities that filed the notice to the Army Corps, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. "Year after year our waterways are polluted, and the health and livelihoods of Floridians are threatened. Florida's residents, from fisherman to manatee, deserve better."

The Center for Biological Diversity is joined by the Calusa Waterkeeper and Waterkeeper Alliance. They contest the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' plan to extend through 2025 a water management plan that allows Lake O discharges of "waters polluted with toxic, nutrient-rich agricultural waste" west into the Caloosahatchee and east into the St. Lucie.

The federal agencies have 60 days to respond to the claims. While the thought of litigation always makes us wince, we understand the frustration that has prompted the action on the part of the water quality watchdogs. We Floridians, and the environment we call home, absolutely deserve better — much better — and we agree, it may well be time to put some bite behind our bark.

For if shorelines littered with dead fish by the ton, dozens of dolphins, sea turtles and manatees is not a wake-up call, the time for talk and promises is probably past.

Still, we would like to believe that our elected representatives — those who hold the purse strings and actually have legislative authority concerning the policies implemented by the agencies named — are willing to listen, are willing to address the crisis.

For make no mistake, we are in the midst of nothing short of a dire life and lifestyle crisis.

On our coast, Congressman Francis Rooney has been on top of the issue since he was first elected two years ago.

On the Treasure Coast, fellow first-termer Congressman Brian Mast also has made water quality a top priority.

We thank them for their efforts thus far and we urge them to continue the fight, which is, unfortunately, far from over as recent decisions to extend both discharges and sugar land leases plainly indicate.

We also urge the public to remain vocal and vigilant.

While red tide has relaxed along Lee County's "back-to-normal" beaches in time for the start of season, and while the blue-green algae that slimed our canals is mostly a bad memory, we cannot forget the Environmental Hurricane of 2018.

It's harm was far greater than the visible damage of dead sealife and pea-green canals.

Habitats died.

And those seagrass beds and hatcheries are going to take years to recover.

We can help Congressman Mast quantify the harm to our environmental and our economy by taking part in his survey found at <https://mast.house.gov/watersurvey>.

And, on the state level, we can let our governor-elect, Ron DeSantis, know what we think about the actions of the South Florida Water Management District Board concerning the backdoor lease extension affecting state-owned land earmarked for water projects and the board's rejection of city-requested Lake O water level changes and discharge schedules.

Water management board members are appointed by the governor with the existing panel having been appointed by Gov. Rick Scott.

Governor-elect DeSantis's pre-inaugural web site is rondesantis.com.

— Breeze editorial