



Carmage Walls
Commentary Prize

2019 Entry Form

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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.

Going 'green'

Pea soup. Guacamole. Slime green. Putrid chartreuse.

Descriptions vary but the dismay throughout all of south Florida is universal — the green gunk chumming the Caloosahatchee with noxious toxins is an environmental crisis — and a preventable one.

Elected officials at both the state and federal level have had nearly two decades to mitigate the issue of nutrient-heavy, algae-laden discharges from Lake Okeechobee that again have resulted in shore-to-shore “blooms” in not only the Caloosahatchee but some Cape canals.

They have dallied.

And while progress has been made of late with both approval and fiscal followup of Florida Senate Bill 10 for the creation of a new billion-dollar reservoir project south of the lake via state-federal cost sharing, it is an effort long, long overdue.

Congressman Francis Rooney, who has spearheaded the Everglades restoration effort since taking office a year and a half ago, summed the issue up succinctly.

“If this commitment to solving our water quality issues were present 18 years ago, instead of 18 months ago, our current algae blooms would not be occurring,” he said in a release that hailed support for the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir plan, part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, or CERP, approved in 2000.

The \$1.3 billion project, which has both White House support and “placeholder” funding approval, would provide water storage south of Lake Okeechobee.

This would then reduce discharges to the Caloosahatchee when water levels in the lake rise high enough to threaten the surrounding Herbert Hoover Dike, itself now set for an expedited \$514 million in repairs to be funded with post Hurricane Irma federal disaster recovery funds.

Thank you and thank you.

But that does not change the fact that progress has lollygagged and that key opportunities for mitigation have been ignored by the state’s it-ain’t-easy-bein’-green officials, including some who are now finger-pointing at the feds because constituents — aka voters — are decrying the smelly slime oozing beyond their backyards.

Consider:

Once hailed as a “gift to the Everglades,” state officials let lapse in 2015 a much-cut but still sweet contract to buy thousands of acres south of Lake Okeechobee from U.S. Sugar for wetlands restoration.

This would have mitigated water releases west into the Caloosahatchee and east into the St. Lucie River, also plagued by the current bloom that has resulted in water warning signs at all of Cape Coral’s riverfront parks.

It’s not like there was no money.

Floridians in 2014 passed Amendment 1, a water and land conservation initiative that requires that a portion of all documentary stamp fees on real estate transactions collected by the state be used to “acquire, restore, improve, and manage conservation lands.”

Purchase of the acreage U.S. Sugar had agreed to sell in 2008 was high on the list of those stressing the benefits of the amendment’s passage.

So how were those funds — then estimated to be about \$750 million for the upcoming year alone — used out of the gate?

Instead of earmarking the money as intended by the 75 percent majority that voted “yes” to the constitutional amendment, the “water quality” pols we entrust to 1) represent the people who elected them and 2) adhere to the state’s bedrock governing document, its constitution, allocated just a portion of that — for “operating and regulatory” expenses for existing agencies.

Three years after that first post-vote budget, Floridians still aren’t getting the bang for the buck intended to fund conservation efforts such as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

So don’t just blame the feds, including the Army Corps of Engineers.

There’s blame aplenty to go around.

What’s needed now is a concerted — and continuing — commitment to the solutions at hand.

That starts with a full and proper allocation of funds as approved by the voters.

Before the next water quality driven State of Emergency that, unfortunately, has given a whole new meaning to the expression, “going green.”

— Breeze editorial

Environmental hurricane

It's a storm that blew no winds.

No torrential rains poured down.

But the death and devastation that has rolled up upon our beaches, bays and waterways and drifted its way up the coast to Tampa Bay makes the Environmental Hurricane of 2018 one for the record books.

Due to the worst bloom of red tide in more than a decade, Fort Myers Beach continues to clean up dead fish by the thousands along with trails of sea grasses that provide the habitat "beds" for hatchlings and the stuff on which they feed.

Sanibel has multiple crews working daily to clean up even greater numbers of sea life carcasses that have included tarpon, a 26-foot whale shark, and endangered species like goliath grouper and sea turtles by the score.

Florida Fish & Wildlife is retrieving numerous dead manatees from Lee County waters with nearly half — an incredible number — having died from red tide poisoning. There were 57 such confirmed red-tide caused deaths here as of Aug. 4, compared to 19 in all of 2017.

And if the on-shore outbreak of toxin-producing *Karenia brevis*, the organism that makes up red tide, isn't bad enough, an unrelated bloom of a different algae, cyanobacteria, is wreaking similar havoc in the Caloosahatchee and canals in Cape Coral, Pine Island and North Fort Myers.

Nutrient-heavy, algae-laden discharges from Lake Okeechobee have resulted in 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 west coast is experiencing the devastation that the east coast experienced from this blue-green algae in 2016.

It's a disaster of unprecedented scope and duration with an environmental impact that will be felt along the Gulf Coast for years, though hopefully not as many as it has been in the making.

For the perfect storm that has swept south Florida coast to coast is the result — the direct result — of man's inept attempt to whore out Mother Nature to the highest bidder.

Decades of special-interest donations and political pandering have come home to float on waters fed to literal death with pollutants from not only agricultural lands as is being touted, but developed areas rich with fertilizers and other wastes that leach into our watershed.

Now we are in a declared state of emergency at the local, county, state and still-to-come federal level to pay for a cleanup that would not have been needed had our elected representatives actually implemented — i.e. funded — the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan approved nearly two decades ago.

Instead, the feds protected sugar subsidies and the states gutted environmental regulations and postponed, postponed and postponed again opportunities to buy land offered — contractually offered — by sugar growers for wetlands restoration to mitigate water discharges from polluted Lake Okeechobee east through the Caloosahatchee into the Gulf and west into the St. Lucie River.

But blame, and responsibility, for the mess we are in does not end there.

We, the voters of Florida, are part of the process — and a large part of any solution.

We overwhelmingly have voted for, or supported, clean water efforts ever since the Everglades Forever Act was passed in 1994 to establish quality standards.

Voters approved the "polluters pay" constitutional amendment in 2003 and a water and land conservation initiative in 2014 that required a specific portion of existing fees be used to "acquire, restore, improve, and manage conservation lands."

The state legislature ignored both voter mandates.

Which is what our elected officials on all levels will continue to do as long as it won't affect their election, or re-election, funded, of course, with PAC contributions.

May the Environmental Hurricane of 2018 be more than the storm we tearfully tell our grandchildren about.

May it be the winds of change blowing in the direction of protection.

Finally and forever.

— Breeze editorial

Support the cause, support your neighbors

The devastation wrought by the double punch of a 125-mile swatch of red tide off Gulf Coast beaches from Marco Island to Tampa Bay and the plague of blue-green algae sliming the Caloosahatchee and Cape canals has been well publicized, causing outrage nationwide.

As well it should.

Sea life by the millions — everything from the smallest of fishes to endangered species — manatees, sea turtles and porpoises — have died in what is easily the worst man-made environmental catastrophe our state has seen in recent memory.

People are no longer asking for answers, they are demanding action — and getting some.

Finally and, unfortunately, at great cost to not only our environment, but to our economy where many of our neighbors have become collateral damage.

Fort Myers Beach businesses have suffered a collective estimated revenue loss of more than \$24 million since July 27 with another near million in estimated lost wages.

On Sanibel, the total economic impact for July and August totals an estimated \$19.1 million in lost revenue, a year-over-year decrease of 41.2 percent in August alone.

Anyone who says environmental protection is “too costly” has likely never paid the direct price of its lack.

Our neighbors are not among them.

“Closed” signs and workers wondering how to put food on the table may go unnoticed on the national level, but here at home, such things are not to be ignored.

What can we do?

Well, the appearance of the beaches on Fort Myers Beach, Sanibel and Captiva have returned to normal.

They are, in fact, “gorgeous” as of today, according to officials in our beach-front communities.

They, and the businesses on Sanibel, Captiva and Fort Myers Beach, invite all of us down to enjoy a post-summer, pre-season dinner or lunch or maybe some beverages at sunset.

(And yes, local providers assure, the seafood served is safe to eat.)

We may not be able to immediately heal our water woes but we can help mitigate the collateral damage incurred by our neighbors.

And we can do it without a whole lot of effort, without a whole lot of cost.

#OneLee.

Support the cause. Help a neighbor in need.

— *Breeze editorial*

Winds of change

“Speak up! Be a disrupter. Some people think that’s a bad thing, but it’s not. It wakes people up. Make those phone calls.

“What I don’t want you to do is to sit here and wait for them to come and tell you. I want you to start sending them the message. They need to hear from you. If you are having health problems, call the health department. Call them again, not one of you, not 10 of you, not 20 of you, but 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 of you. I don’t care if they get stressed out. I don’t care if their phone is ringing off the hook. Call them, call them, call them, call them, call them, until they respond. They want to make their job to ignore you, make it your job that they hear you.”

Environmental activist Erin Brockovich issued a powerful call to action for Floridans Wednesday.

And she added one more: Take your water quality concerns to the ballot box.

We agree — emphatically agree — it’s time for voters across the state to insist that our local, state and federal representatives prioritize water quality issues by cleaning up the mess they created through subsidies, de-regulation and the misappropriation of funds voters specifically earmarked to restore and revitalize South Florida watersheds from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

This is not a “party” issue — the environmental and financial devastation wrought by the Environmental Hurricane of 2018 has electrified a nerve along the entire political spectrum.

If substantive change is going to happen — finally happen — it needs to be now while the memory of thousands upon thousands of fish carcasses cast upon our beaches is still seared in everyone’s memory.

Now, while images of dead sea turtles, dead porpoises, dead manatees and even a dead whale shark are burned upon our hearts.

Now, while our neighbors are forced to food banks and mobile distribution sites, human faces of the \$40 million economic impact suffered in just two months on Sanibel and Fort Myers Beach alone.

The first “drop” of mail ballots for the Nov. 6 General Election begins today across Lee County.

We urge voters to research the records and positions of those asking for our vote, be they incumbents or be they newcomers, be they Republicans or be they Democrats.

Follow the money for no, the big bucks offered by lobbyists representing special interests are not limited to any particular party nor any particular espoused-for-public- consumption school of thought.

Do your homework, eschew the rhetoric and prioritize water solutions this election.

Politics aside, Ms. Brockovich is correct: Change begins with us.

Vote accordingly.

Or brace yourself for the next environmental storm that is sure to come.

— Breeze editorial

Battle won, fight goes on

Southwest Floridians horrified by this summer's unprecedented environmental disaster received some good news on the water quality front this week.

Gulf waters off the beaches of Sanibel and Fort Myers Beach saw an abatement of the red tide blooms that resulted in not only massive fish kills, but the deaths of sea turtles, dolphins and manatees by the score.

Also abating is the blue-green algae blooms that slimed the Caloosahatchee and canals in Cape Coral and other communities.

Water quality samples for both red tide and Cyanobacteria are finally showing minimal levels of the algae that had proliferated to record numbers coast to coast, fed by nutrient-laden discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee here and the St. Lucie River on the east coast.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, long-awaited federal legislation to address water quality issues nationwide became law.

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 suffered an estimated loss of \$41 million in the months of July and August alone.

The act advances 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 approved the construction of the reservoir to store and treat water, so it can then flow naturally south, in 2017.

The act also expedites a review of the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule, or LORS.

The Army Corps must begin an update next year so that accurate data will be available when repairs to the Herbert Hoover Dike around Lake O are expected to be completed in 2022.

The repairs will enable the lake to safely hold more water; the data will better address flow post-repair.

The act also calls for “a five-year technology demonstration project supporting research into projects that help detect, prevent, reduce, and mitigate the occurrence of harmful algal blooms.”

“...WRDA will allow us to build on the funding successes we have achieved over the last 21 months and provide needed resources to get our water quality fixed,” said Congressman Francis Rooney, who has made water issues a primary focus since taking office two years ago.

“Joined with \$206 million recently appropriated by the House, a total of \$610 million will be set aside to complete the Herbert Hoover Dike repairs by 2022 instead of the end of the decade,” a release from his office states. “Every year saved completing these repairs is a year that harmful releases into our ecosystem will stop sooner.”

Efforts have led to \$115 million being set aside for CERP in the FY2019 budget with a total of nearly \$1.1 billion appropriated for dike repairs and CERP projects this fiscal year and next, according to his office.

That's a lot of state and federal money and it certainly is a victory on the water quality battlefield.

We're grateful.

But the fight to restore the Everglades and related watersheds is far from over.

Local water quality warriors emphasize that while millions have been allocated, it's still not full funding for all 68 projects long ago approved in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

We must continue to be vocal.

We must continue to be vigilant.

For our children.

And for the Southwest Florida that will be theirs.

— *Breeze editorial*

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