

Algae, seaweed discolor Florida waters and beaches

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Tourism, fishing and public health are being threatened by contaminants discoloring stretches of beaches at the southern end of the Florida peninsula.

Blue-green algae that covers much of Lake Okeechobee has been growing and flowing through canals connecting the freshwater lake to sensitive estuaries on the east and west coasts of the state. Residents and business owners fear the thick, toxic slime could strand their boats in marinas during peak tourism months.

Meanwhile, red tide in the Gulf of Mexico has been killing fish and causing respiratory irritation in southwest Florida, and thick mats of smelly, brown seaweed have coated beaches along the state's Atlantic coast.

"One day it will be fine, then something will trigger the algae and it will get completely green," Stuart resident Leslie Stempel said in a WFOR-TV report . "We're so early in the summer, it's just going to get worse and worse."

A reprieve continued Tuesday for the St. Lucie River and the Caloosahatchee River from the flushing of hundreds of billions of gallons of water out of Lake Okeechobee to relieve pressure on its aging dike. The St. Lucie flows into the Atlantic and the Caloosahatchee into the Gulf.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has said those discharges likely would resume this week to reduce the flood risk that rising lake levels pose to nearby communities.

Even so, the discharges have become a political sticking point in a crucial election year, as Republican Gov. Rick Scott challenges incumbent Democrat Bill Nelson for a U.S. Senate seat.

Both Nelson and Scott have claimed some credit for \$500 million from hurricane recovery funds that the Corps is setting aside to accelerate repairs to Okeechobee's dike.

The algae blooms have become an annual summer threat, fed by nutrients from cattle ranches and farms surrounding the country's second largest natural freshwater lake. But two years ago, pressure from the powerful sugar industry prompted the Florida Legislature to push back a lake cleanup deadline another 20 years.

The Trump administration is reviewing plans for a new Everglades reservoir that would give water managers more flexibility when lake levels rise.

Scott declared a state of emergency Monday for seven counties around the lake to give state environmental and tourism agencies more resources to respond to problems caused by the algae. The order also authorizes flushing water south of the lake instead of down the rivers that run to the coasts.

Repairs on the dike are expected to continue until 2022. Until then, lake levels must be kept between 12.5 feet (3.8 meters) and 15.5 feet (4.7 meters). On Tuesday, the lake stage was 14.46 feet (4.4 meters), swelled with recent rains over the past two weeks.

In southwest Florida over the past week, a monthslong bloom of red tide has been blamed for respiratory irritations and dead fish, turtles and manatees. Red tide is another kind of algae that can be exacerbated by fertilizers and other pollution.

Along parts of South Florida's Atlantic coast, mounds of seaweed known as sargassum have been pushed ashore by strong winds and ocean currents, dulling the water and coating beaches. Experts say the seaweed itself is not harmful, but it can hide stinging jellyfish.

"We don't really like the feeling of it," beachgoer Linda Lunghi said in a WPLG-TV interview on a Fort Lauderdale beach. "We like the clear, blue waters. Unfortunately, that's not what it is now."

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