

“Red tide” bacteria toxin devastates marine life along Florida’s Gulf Coast

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Over the past several weeks, more than 600 tons of marine life have been found dead amidst an explosive growth of bacteria along the beaches of Florida’s Gulf Coast. The rapid spread of the harmful toxin, known as the “red tide bloom,” has been recklessly encouraged by human-induced nutrient pollution, mainly from the Tampa Bay area, which is placing the lives of wildlife and humans at significant risk.

The massive flood of red tide bacteria that has killed large numbers of fish has been reported in numerous counties in the region, including Pinellas (St. Petersburg), Hillsborough (Tampa) and Pasco. Investigations of the deadly bacteria have found them to be the result of a higher-than-normal growth of algae along Florida’s coastline.

On Friday, the National Weather Service issued an advisory warning for the Florida Gulf coast of the respiratory dangers residents face as a result of encountering harmful red tide bacteria. The warning was directed at Pinellas County in particular, where a Beach Hazard Statement was put in place to warn beachgoers and local authorities of respiratory irritation from the outbreak.

In opposition to demands from environmentalists, fisherman, and local officials that a state of emergency should be issued to address the crisis, Governor Ron DeSantis rebuffed calls for an emergency declaration during a news conference on Thursday in St. Petersburg.

Although the governor told the media the state harnessed enough funds to ameliorate the disaster, nothing was said on how the crisis would be tackled in the next coming weeks or of any strategic planned outline. Most revealing during the conference was the governor’s tacit admission that an emergency declaration would create more problems for the state’s profitable vacation hotspots and that a wider-scale public health response would affect tourist revenue.

The type of dangerous algae appearing around the state’s bay and inlets areas are known as Harmful Algal Blooms (HAB), with this year’s HAB comprising one of the largest the Gulf coast has seen since 2018. HAB growth has been led by a bacteria known as *Karenia brevis*, a marine phytoplankton that grow within the algal blooms. *K. brevis* are known for congregating together under conditions of three ingredients: low water salinity, warm waters, and nutrient-rich waters.

Blooms such as red tide are significant threats to life and well-being, as they can lead to major respiratory issues in people. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *K. brevis* produces toxins that cause “neurotoxic shellfish poisoning.” The bacteria can endanger people when they ingest shellfish compromised by toxins. This can lead to numbness, tingling, loss of coordination, vomiting and diarrhea.

Perhaps most ominously, hospital records researchers discovered after analyzing hospital records that respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses increase during periods of red tides. In one study, hospital admissions for respiratory diagnoses rose 54 percent for coastal residents.

When asked about the refusal to implement an emergency response, DeSantis declared during Thursday’s press conference that it would “hurt some of these people [tourists] because it would send the message that somehow all of Florida has problems.”

Democratic St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman pleaded with DeSantis to provide more assistance to derail the inundation of toxins on the city’s shoreline. The DeSantis administration responded with hostility, as a spokesperson issued a statement accusing Krisemen of “deliberately lying and using Red Tide as an attempt to score cheap political points.”

Krisemen, who was not invited to the press conference, criticized DeSantis on Twitter for his “politicization” of the state’s response, before calling the administration’s

actions “truly sickening.”

In denying the accusation, DeSantis unconvincingly asserted that the threat of algal blooms was something he had “tackled from Day 1” while in office. The right-wing governor also claimed the state had prepared in advance for red tide outbreaks and supposedly had the resources to resolve the crisis.

This declaration is belied by the fact that the administration and state officials ignored warnings from scientists in April of this year when a massive amount of nutrient-rich wastewater was dumped into Tampa Bay from the Piney Point phosphate plant, an industrial site in Manatee County. While the full impact of the accident took months to discern, pollution experts feared that the elevated concentrations of nitrogen and phosphorus in the wastewater were dangerous, as they are known to fuel phytoplankton growth and toxic algal bloom.

Three weeks before a hazardous emergency was publicly sent out to evacuate nearby Manatee County residents, a dangerous leak had sprung at Piney Point, which had been defunct since 2001. The facility houses stacks of phosphogypsum, a toxic, radioactive substance that is commonly utilized in fertilizer production. The phosphogypsum was placed within open-air ponds and was used as part of accumulated stacks of solid waste, which can reach up to five stories tall while becoming crudely efficient containment ponds for liquid waste.

Managing the open-air ponds requires round-the-clock supervision. In the Piney Point leak, one wastewater pond’s inch-thick plastic liner tore, releasing thousands of gallons a day into the sediment beneath. Despite the efforts of crews to plug up the berm, wastewater by the hundreds of millions of gallons ended up being unleashed.

An investigation conducted by the *Tampa Bay Times* following the leak quickly confirmed that the environmental disaster was the product of criminal neglect and subordination of public safety to the profit interests of financial firms. The crisis was triggered after the site’s current owner, private investment company HRK Holdings, added waste from a Port Manatee dredging project to Piney Point’s gyp stacks. This was despite opposition from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which warned that the project might come with unacceptable risk.

These warnings were repeatedly swept under the rug even after an independent engineering firm hired to evaluate the site in March of 2020 found an imminent danger of “catastrophic damage to the public and the environment” due to the “unknown and likely

compromised condition” of the liner.

Numerous environmental organizations have released statements denouncing the governor’s failed response to deter red tide. Many have lambasted the governor for greenlighting the same disastrous and negligent policies of his predecessor, Rick Scott, now a US senator. Scott was embroiled in a similar crisis in 2018 when a massive red tide bloom along Florida’s southwestern coast killed approximately 2,000 tons of marine life and caused much damage or state and local businesses.

Scott’s tenure as governor is infamous for slashing funding for water management safety across districts and eliminating environmental regulations. Shortly after becoming governor in 2011, Scott spearheaded budgets that cut more than \$700 million in funding for water management boards. The South Florida Water Management District, the agency that works on Everglades restoration and advises the Army Corps of Engineers on Lake Okeechobee discharges, had its budget slashed nearly in half and was forced to lay off more than 100 people.

While falsely hailing the budget reductions as the only method to protect the state’s waters, Scott signed legislation that capped the amount in property taxes water management districts could collect. Revealing his contempt for all regulatory restrictions that hamper the interests of the corporate and financial elite, Scott said in a news release announcing the cuts that they would allow “businesses to use more of their hard-earned money in the way they see best, rather than having to send it to a government agency.”

In subsequent years, the cuts had the effect of weakening environmental protections for the state’s wetlands, springs and rivers threatened by pollution. To date, water district budgets statewide are still \$400 million less than when Scott took office. Scott also repealed a 2010 law requiring septic tanks to be inspected once every five years to curtail toxic sewage flowing into freshwater streams. Environmentalists say that unregulated and unchecked leaky tanks are helping fuel algal blooms on the Gulf coast.



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