

Reel Time: The price of inaction

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By

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On Monday, March 26, the latest and hopefully final chapter unfolded in a sordid novel with no redeeming chapters and a far less-than-happy ending. The saga began in the 1960s when the Borden Corporation (yes, the cow) was given a permit by Manatee County to build a processing facility at Piney Point to turn phosphate into fertilizer. In the early 70s, the company went into bankruptcy and literally walked away from the property, leaving the tailings from the processing in giant, toxic mounds on the edges of Tampa Bay. The history of the site is one of mistakes and missteps that would, and probably will, one day fill a novel on the price of inaction.

Video Player

The leaking gyp stack and pond at Piney Point. – Rusty Chinnis | Sun

Suncoast Waterkeeper and Tampa Bay Waterkeeper are organizations that I've highlighted in this column over the past few years. Both are playing a central role in trying to understand the underlying issues so that they can disseminate current and reliable information to the public.

As of Sunday, April 4, we were being told that the collapse of the compromised gypsum stack was no longer imminent, although the area had been evacuated. Meanwhile, untreated, polluted water from the site is being pumped into Tampa Bay at the rate of 22,000 gallons a minute. Water from the breach in the stack, along with water from additional pumps that are being flown in, is being drained from the stack. That water will most likely be carried into Bishop Harbor to the west and Cockroach Bay to the east. Both are designated as Outstanding Florida Waters.

It's hard to imagine anything positive emerging from this ecological nightmare other than, hopefully, a wake-up call to the public that this is what happens when politicians and public officials don't follow their mandate to work for the public good. That realization seems to be on the lips of most everyone I talk to, but in truth, this is a shared responsibility. We the citizens are also responsible to hold our elected officials accountable to do the work we elected them to do. This is an example of what can happen when citizens don't pay attention and let others make decisions on their behalf.

This will be an unfolding story of the incalculable damage that results from greed, inaction, lack of accountability and irresponsible actions by parties on all levels from the county to the highest offices in Florida and beyond. Even now we're hearing statements claiming the water "meets industry standards, outside of ammonia, nitrate and phosphorus levels," which is to say, of course, that it doesn't meet industry standards. Spin isn't going to play this time. Dave Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, told me on April 4 that he's working with Ed Sherwood, director of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, to calculate loads from the release and they are, in fact, "much worse than I was led to believe." Both Tampa Bay Waterkeeper and Suncoast Waterkeeper are working to update the public with the latest updates on Facebook. Stay tuned, get involved and hold your elected officials responsible for protecting the public good. In the end, it's the public and our natural resources that pay the price of inaction.