



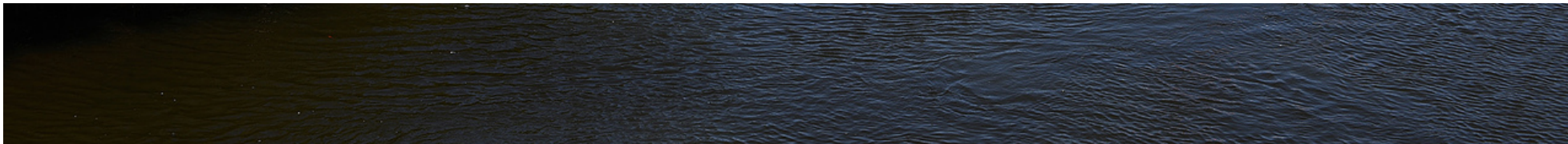
LOCAL

'The bay is not in great shape.' After Piney Point, water advocates push for pollution cuts

BY RYAN BALLOGG

JUNE 18, 2021 07:19 AM, UPDATED 3 HOURS 33 MINUTES AGO





Ed Sherwood, Executive Director of Tampa Bay Estuary Program talks about ways to keep area waters clean. BY [TIFFANY TOMPKINS](#) 



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MANATEE

Water advocates and scientists are pushing to curb nutrient pollution of all sizes in the wake of a major wastewater discharge into Tampa Bay.

The Tampa Bay area, including Manatee County, is experiencing what could be fallout from the Piney Point industrial site discharge, which released 215 million gallons of nutrient-laden water into the estuary in May.

Major blooms of red tide and *Lyngbya*, a blue-green algae, have followed in the vicinity of the discharge. The blooms have resulted in dead fish, seagrass beds abandoned by marine life and tainted beaches and waterways. And they're not over yet.

Groups that monitor area waterways agree that shutting down [Piney Point](#) is a crucial step in protecting Tampa Bay area waters from future discharges.

“Hopefully it’s impetus for full and final closure of the facility,” said Ed Sherwood, executive director of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, referring to the discharge and

ensuing algae blooms. “This further exemplifies the true cost of nutrient pollution to our coastal waters.”

But closure of the site is likely a long way off, and efforts to curb pollution can’t stop there, water advocates say.



Secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Noah Valenstein said his staff will remain at Piney Point until they come up with a way to get rid of all the contaminated water near Tampa Bay.

BY **TIFFANY TOMPKINS** ✉

Nutrient pollution from humans to area waterways comes in many forms, Sherwood notes, all of which are worth addressing.

“We have to remain vigilant,” he said.

Present day water quality in Tampa Bay is better than it was in the 1980s [thanks to decades of focused restoration efforts](#), Sherwood notes. But seagrass abundance, which is a sign of overall water health, has been declining in some areas in recent years. Sherwood and others worry that progress could be lost and send the area spiraling backwards, much like what has happened over the past decade at Indian River Lagoon on Florida’s east coast.

“They went through significant loss of seagrass resources. Since that time, they’ve been struggling with harmful algal blooms, low dissolved oxygen, fish kill events and now mortalities of manatees that are tied to the loss of seagrass and starvation,” Sherwood said. “We definitely don’t want to repeat those same mistakes on the west coast of Florida, or in our bays.”

To prevent that from happening, estuary program scientists favor an approach that targets pollution big and small, from residential runoff to stormwater systems and industrial waste.

“It’s really trying to attack the problem from multiple angles,” Sherwood said.

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Many efforts are already underway, according to Sherwood, including improvements to infrastructure and stormwater systems. Another approach being implemented, including in Manatee County, is propagating [shellfish beds](#) that act as living water filters in area waterways.

Other efforts, like a Tampa Bay Estuary Program initiative to encourage residents to check the condition of household pipes, are about to launch.

“We suspect a large contributor to sanitary sewer overflows are poorly maintained private lateral systems — the pipes that lead from a person’s house to the public sewer systems in the roads. You can contribute to the bays’ restoration by being knowledgeable about your personal impacts,” Sherwood said.

Policy changes can also help. And it appears local officials are already getting onboard with some new efforts to curb pollution as a result of the recent algae blooms.

At a meeting on Thursday, commissioners proposed expanding Manatee County’s fertilizer ban. The ban goes into effect each year between June 1 and Sept. 30. It outlaws the use of certain fertilizers that can be carried into coastal waterways during the rainy season, where they exacerbate algae problems.

However, water advocates say that the ban is not always followed or enforced.

“It’s the little things. We can focus on a big thing like Piney Point, but little things help, too,” said Commissioner George Kruse. “Every little bit helps.”

The fertilizer issue was raised by commissioners Kruse and Kevin Van Ostenbridge, who recently toured coastal Manatee County with Suncoast Waterkeeper board

member Rusty Chinnis.

Chinnis showed the officials some of the areas being impacted by the Lyngbya algae.

“This year we’re having a pretty bad spell, and right now, the bay is not in great shape,” Van Ostenbridge said Thursday.

Chinnis says that residents need to keep pressure on their representatives to address ongoing water quality issues.

“Demand real action,” Chinnis said. “They’ve got to take care of the source of the problem, which is too many nutrients in the water. No more studies necessary.”



Rusty Chinnis, board member of Waterkeepers, talks about the dangers to the environment of Tampa Bay as a result of the release of contaminated water from Piney Point. BY [TIFFANY TOMPKINS](#) ✉

WHERE DID PINEY POINT NUTRIENTS GO?

University of South Florida researchers announced several weeks ago that the nutrients released into Tampa Bay from the Piney Point discharge appeared to have diluted in area waters without major impact.

However, other scientists feel that the announcement was premature and sent a message, perhaps unintentionally, that the pollution event was over.

“This is not something that’s normal,” said Sarasota Bay Estuary Program executive director David Tomasko. “We have not dodged a bullet. We believe we’re in the middle of the expression of that nutrient load.”





Captains Scott Moore, son Justin Moore and nephew Carson Stipcich discuss impacts through the years of Piney Point on local water quality and the harmful effects on the ecosystem. BY **TIFFANY TOMPKINS** ✉

During a press conference in May, USF researchers noted a non-harmful algal bloom that formed in Port Manatee after the Piney Point discharge and then dissipated. But Tomasko says they missed the extent of what was happening below the surface.

“I think they felt that we didn’t have an algae bloom because they actually weren’t spending enough time underneath the waves,” said Tomasko, whose group goes on regular dives to check the water conditions. “(The models) are a useful tool, but it’s not the only way you should gain your understanding.”

Tampa Bay Estuary Program scientists also observed the non-harmful diatom bloom in the Port Manatee area noted by USF, but Sherwood said it was also followed by an uptick of *Lyngbya* in the seagrass beds there. A massive bloom of *Lyngbya* algae has since developed farther south around coastal Manatee County and Anna Maria Sound, while red tide is plaguing waters in lower Tampa Bay and in the Gulf of Mexico along Pinellas County.





A controlled release of millions of gallons of contaminated water is slated to begin at Port Manatee after Piney Point discovered a leak in the gypsum stacks. Environmentalists worry about the impact on Tampa Bay. BY [TIFFANY TOMPKINS](#) ✉

USF researchers have also repeatedly said that there is [not yet enough evidence](#) to draw a link between Piney Point and the severity of the red tide bloom affecting Tampa Bay.

But scientists with both estuary programs suspect that the nutrients from the Piney Point have continued to cycle through the system, feeding local algal blooms.

“The only significant source of nutrients going into the system during the dry season was the Piney Point discharge,” Sherwood said. “Now there’s a transition and cycle of different algal bloom species blooming and dying off. The latest manifestation of probably too many nutrients being in lower Tampa Bay and upper Sarasota Bay is the red tide event.”

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Tomasko said the Piney Point water contained more than enough nutrients to fuel the blooms currently being seen in Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay. He also takes into account the testimony of long-time residents and fishing captains he has spoken with who have never seen Lyngbya algae blooms of this magnitude.

Another piece of potential evidence Tomasko offers comes from Australia's Roebuck Bay, where scientists have found that human-related nutrient inputs were directly fueling major Lyngbya blooms.

"The time lag of about two months from nutrient load to Lyngbya bloom was exactly what they found there," Tomasko said.

As scientists wait for a more definitive picture of Piney Point's impacts, they agree on one major point now: combating nutrient pollution is key in curbing harmful algal blooms and the devastation that can follow.

[Gov. Ron DeSantis held a round table in St. Petersburg](#) on Thursday to discuss ongoing work to curb red tide, including research, monitoring, cleanup and prevention efforts.

Tom Frazer, the current dean of USF's College of Marine Science and recently departed chief science officer for the state, was among those invited to attend.

"Red tides are complex phenomena and we have much to learn about their dynamics," Frazer said in a statement following event. "We do know, however, that increased nutrient delivery to our coastal waters can exacerbate red tide events and every effort should be made to reduce nutrient pollution."

Staff writer Ryan Callihan contributed to this report.



04/06/21—The Tampa Bay Estuary Program wants to find ways to limit pollution from finding its way into the area waterways, like Frog Creek.
TIFFANY TOMPKINS TTOMPKINS@BRADENTON.COM

RYAN BALLOGG

    941-745-7024

Ryan Ballogg is a news reporter and features writer at the Bradenton Herald. Since joining the paper in 2018, he has received awards for features, art and environmental writing in the Florida Press Club's Excellence in

Journalism Competition. Ryan is a Florida native and graduated from University of South Florida St. Petersburg.

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Lynn Aragon

The no fertilizer zones along the bays and canals is not being enforced. Widespread communications need to be sent especially to HOA's and condo communities on the Palma Sola Bay, for example. I live on canal in Palma Sola Bay surrounded by condominium communities who fertilize right up to their seawalls and blow grass clippings into the canals. I've requested that my community stop doing that, and we have, but the other bigger communities have not. They don't understand that the fertilizer they spread filters down into that 10 foot no fertilizer zone anyway, so what they spread is just overkil... [See More](#)

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Robert Shapiro

Yes, the County Commission caused this problem by ignoring Piney Point until it became a catastrophe. Then, with the approval of the Florida EPA, they dumped hundreds of millions of gallons of radioactive water into the Bay. Many people, including DeSantis, have done flyovers and visits to portray the image that they care. Then, the Florida Legislature said it was going to "fix the problem for good." But that hasn't happened. Nothing has been done.

Instead, the only people who care are a rag-tag group of environmentalists. ALL levels of government which caused this disaster have long moved on... [See More](#)

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