

NEWS / ENVIRONMENT

Red Tide's return raises fears about the health of Tampa Bay

The toxic bloom is an immediate crisis. But estuary leaders fear that the bay's long-term health is endangered.



Tampa Bay Times



Dead fish fill the end of a canal along Snell Isle on July 16 in St. Petersburg. [DOUGLAS R. CLIFFORD | Times]

By **Zachary T. Sampson** and **Natalie Weber**

Published Jul. 23

Updated Jul. 23

Tampa Bay Times

Friday, as a toxic Red Tide bloom torments the region.

They held up the Indian River Lagoon on Florida's East Coast as an example. The loss of seagrasses there following repeated algal blooms and pollution is considered a likely cause for [this year's mass die-off of starving manatees](#).

"It only took two years of bad water quality in the Indian River Lagoon to really set them back decades," said Ed Sherwood, executive director of the Tampa Bay Estuary Program. "We need to get our bay back on track, and we need to get it back on track quickly."

RELATED: [With Tampa Bay in grip of Red Tide, shrimpers turn their nets toward death](#)

Sherwood spoke at a forum organized by the environmental advocacy organizations Tampa Bay Waterkeeper and Suncoast Waterkeeper. The Tampa Bay Estuary Program is one of several groups in Florida tasked with helping to protect estuaries of national significance, as designated by the federal government.

Estuaries like Tampa Bay are biologically rich and diverse ecosystems where freshwater collides with saltwater.

A toxic Red Tide bloom has drifted between the gulf and the bay for more than a month, killing untold numbers of fish like mullet, grouper, trout and snook. Pinellas County has collected more than 1,518 tons of dead sea life and debris. Red Tide is suspected in the deaths of several manatees.

Tampa Bay Times

of Old Tampa Bay plagued by blooms of a different algae called Pyrodinium.

The Burson family of Ohio looks at some of the hundreds of dead fish floating in the water as a result of Red Tide off St. Petersburg on July 14. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

Seagrass beds are a cornerstone of a healthy estuary. They provide habitats for young fish, food for animals like manatees and a natural filter for the water. They need light to grow, and dark algae blooms — like a thick Red Tide — can shade the seafloor, causing seagrasses to decline.

RELATED: [Tampa Bay has Red Tide questions. Here are some answers.](#)

The bay is in better shape now, Sherwood said, than it was in the 1970s or 80s after it was abused for decades as a dumping ground for sewage and other waste. One bad Red Tide might not trigger a severe backslide, he said, but multiple harmful algal blooms in close succession could stack up. The area was last hit by a significant Red Tide in 2018, which is believed to have caused a die-off of seagrass in part of Sarasota Bay to the south.

Humans do not cause Red Tide, said David Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, speaking beside Sherwood on Friday. But manmade pollution can exacerbate blooms.

Both he and Sherwood connected the current outbreak to the release of 215 million gallons of wastewater from the old Piney Point fertilizer plant in Manatee County. The water put a huge load of nitrogen into lower Tampa Bay in April. Nitrogen fuels algae growth.

RELATED: [DeSantis defends state response to Red Tide in Tampa Bay amid calls to declare emergency](#)

After the Piney Point discharge, scientists have said, southerly winds blew a Red Tide bloom from Southwest Florida toward Tampa Bay. It likely met favorable

Tampa Bay Times

“Piney Point didn’t cause that Red Tide,” Tomasko said. “It caused it to be worse.”

Gov. Ron DeSantis [recently brushed off concerns about the release](#), which was approved by the state amid concerns that a leaking reservoir would collapse at the site and flood surrounding neighborhoods. He instead shifted blame to Tropical Storm Elsa.

Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, backed by wildlife experts, marine business owners and politicians, talks about the state’s overall effort to combat the recent Red Tide outbreak plaguing Tampa Bay

Tampa Bay Times

When a St. Pete Beach resident at the Friday forum asked about the governor's statements, Tomasko said dead fish were already in the water before the storm, and Elsa just blew them closer to where a lot of people live. He said the governor has advisors, including scientists with whom everyone may not agree.

“Maybe what he needs is a broader group of experts to listen to,” Tomasko said.

RELATED: [A touristy Tampa Bay dolphin tour through dead fish, Red Tide](#)

Red Tide is not the only bloom that has grown since Piney Point. Mats of an algae known as Lyngbya choked stretches of Anna Maria Sound earlier this year, according to Tomasko — the worst he he had seen in decades. It smelled and looked like sewage, he said, turning off tourists and irritating the skin of anyone who touched it, like they had “been rolling around in attic insulation.”

Tomasko said the nitrogen from Piney Point was particularly problematic because it came in a form that algae can quickly and easily feed upon.

Red Tide conditions over the last week have improved within Tampa Bay, but that has come in conjunction with a worsening situation for Pinellas County's beaches. The county late Friday warned that winds this weekend could cause “stronger Red Tide impacts” on the beaches, including fish kills and breathing problems.

Brothers John Fantini, 59, of Owensboro, Ky., Christopher Fantini, 57 of Rockport, Ind., and Danny Taylor, 52, of Sarasota, enjoy their vacation despite the fish kill from Red Tide at Indian Rocks Beach on Thursday. [ARIELLE BADER | Times]

Rotting fish and flies continue to greet sunbathers in some spots.

“Red Tide’s a lot worse than we thought,” said Chris Do, 21, who had traveled from Utah to visit Indian Rocks Beach.

Al Legaspi, 46, was happy to find sparse crowds at Treasure Island. He had been planning a family vacation since May. His 4-year-old daughter, Alessia, played in the water.

Tampa Bay Times

Under a rainbow umbrella at Pass-a-Grille, Amanda Andrews, 52, said she has been down from Georgia since July 1 and the beaches have been mostly beautiful.

“It is what it is,” she said. “I’ll make the best of it.”

Times staff writer Jake Sheridan contributed to this report.

UP NEXT: [With Tampa Bay in grip of Red Tide, shrimpers turn their nets toward death](#)

ZACHARY T. SAMPSON

Environment Reporter

NATALIE WEBER

Breaking Reporter

YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE

Florida sues Piney Point owner over

Here's how climate change could make

Tampa Bay Times

• News

Red Tide-related limits extended for some fishing in Tampa Bay

Yesterday

• News

Red Tide is further offshore. Thank the wind and sea currents.

Yesterday

• News

Florida is suing Piney Point's owners. Is the state also to blame?

Aug. 9

• News

Rule says some Pinellas hotels must evacuate for storms. It's mostly ignored.

Aug. 9

• News

Florida's deadly manatee crisis could flare again this winter

Aug. 4

• News

Red Tide is still out there, Tampa Bay, but so far fish kills aren't as bad

Aug. 5

• News

On conservation and the environment, Florida Democrats and Republicans see common ground | Column

Aug. 8

• Opinion

A letter from doctors to Gov. DeSantis as schools open | Column

Yesterday

• Opinion

Rays at Red Sox: Luis Patino on the mound

Yesterday

• Sports

New recreational rules on the Weeki Wachee could be coming

Aug. 9

Tampa Bay Times

© 2021 All Rights Reserved | Tampa Bay Times

Help chat >

 Subscribe

 Newsletters

 My Account

[CONTACT US](#)

[ABOUT US](#)

[JOIN US](#)

[MEDIA KIT](#)

[PLACE AN AD](#)

[LEGAL DISCLAIMERS](#)

[LEGAL NOTICES](#)

[SPECIAL SECTIONS](#)



Tampa Bay Times
