

Herald-Tribune

MANATEE

Sarasota and Manatee counties take different approaches to red tide fish kills

Jesse Mendoza Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Published 12:43 p.m. ET Jul. 26, 2021 | Updated 8:27 a.m. ET Jul. 27, 2021

This story has been updated to correct the amount of nitrogen produced by decaying fish killed by red tide. ed.

Local municipalities are taking a variety of approaches toward cleaning up the dead fish and sea life killed by red tide, an effort that some experts could help stem the effects of of the ongoing bloom on local residents, visitors and the businesses they patronize.

Over the past few weeks, a local red tide bloom has killed fish and other marine animals in the Sarasota, Manatee and Tampa Bay region.

During a public forum last week, Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Director David Tomasko highlighted the importance of cleaning up dead fish during a red tide.

Piney Point effect: Estuary programs blame Piney Point for worsening red tide conditions

State response: Emergency declaration over red tide would hurt the economy, Gov. Ron DeSantis says

Previously: Dead fish continue to wash ashore in Sarasota, Manatee

Karenia brevis, the organism responsible for red tide, feeds off nitrogen that can be released by dead sea animals, creating a cycle that sustains the bloom longer, and potentially worsens it when dead fish are not removed.

“First off, get those dead fish out of the system,” Tomasko said on Friday. “There is a nutrient benefit to every fish that you get out of this system. Six hundred tons of fish represents about 4 tons of nitrogen.”

“It doesn’t mean it is going to be easy, it doesn’t mean every fish,” he said. “But these mass accumulations of fish in the canals, get them out of there, because when that fish sinks to the bottom of the canal it’s going to decompose, it’s going to use up all the oxygen, it’s going to make that canal worse. That’s nitrogen that you can get out of there.”

The latest available data from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission shows that red tide continues to bloom in the region, and local governments have taken a variety of approaches to cleaning up dead fish since the red tide bloom started.

Most red tide samples available are from last week, and more recent information has not been publicly posted as of noon on Monday.

Pinellas County and St. Petersburg crews had no choice but to get to work after Tropical Storm Elsa blew in hundreds of thousands of dead sea animals to shore. Crews there have cleaned up at least 1,400 tons of dead fish in recent weeks.

Officials have attributed fish cleanup efforts with progress made toward stemming red tide in Tampa Bay, where water samples published by the FWC on July 19 returned clean for red tide -- a significant improvement.

Sarasota County has taken a hands-off approach and has not reported any dead fish cleanups associated to red tide. Many fish have been reported in recent weeks along Sarasota Bay shores.

Instead the county has stuck with its policy, which states that crews will only clean up an area if shoreline debris along a two-mile stretch is enough to fill a 5-cubic-yard truck, and only if two tidal cycles have not naturally carried the fish away.

Although effects on Manatee County beaches have been the most mild of the three, local officials are taking a different approach. They have intensified its daily beach raking, and has mobilized its drone unit to find pockets of dead fish that might be floating near shore.

Tuesday's agreement with local shrimp boat captains is the latest step Manatee County has taken to minimize the red tide's effect on local residents, tourists and businesses in the area. The agreement is worth up to \$500,000, and uses Tourism Development Tax funds.

"We are staying ahead of the situation," Manatee County Administrator Scott Hopes said in a press release. "We know where red tide is, where it's headed and how we'll address it before it impacts our local beaches."

County crews have already removed small amounts of dead fish in the southern areas of Anna Maria Island, in areas near Longboat Pass, and the Coquina North, Coquina South and Kingfish boat ramps, according to the press release.

On the northern end of the island, the city of Anna Maria has also cleaned up dead fish from city beaches. Red tide levels reached bloom conditions in that area early last week, according to FWC sampling.

The county will discuss the agreement on Tuesday, when commissioners return from summer recess.

This week, commissioners will discuss several important local issues during public meetings. Topics include local red tide, reinstatement of its COVID-19 emergency declaration, and approval of a tentative millage rate.