

ENVIRONMENT

Massive red tide bloom lingering in Sarasota County could be 'every bit as bad as 2018'

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Red tide remains a threat as Tropical Storm Fred failed to generate enough wind to push the bloom away from area shores, Sarasota Bay Estuary Program Director Dave Tomasko said Thursday to members of the Manatee Tiger Bay Club.

Red tide has plagued Sarasota, Manatee and Tampa Bay for months, and although samples from northern Anna Maria Island have shown improvement, Tomasko said a massive bloom in south Sarasota County could mean local woes may not be over yet.

Tomasko said that there is a red tide bloom about 50 square miles in size off the coast of Manasota Beach near Casey Key and the Venice area. The bloom stretches out 15 miles from shore, and he fears conditions could worsen if winds blow inland, reminiscent of 2018 when red tide devastated marine life and the local economy.

“If that moves up here, it is going to be every bit as bad as 2018,” Tomasko said. “Maybe even a little bit more localized.”

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

More: More seabirds sickened from red tide impacts in Sarasota and Manatee counties

And: City of Sarasota starts red tide cleanup effort, removing 1,500 pounds of dead fish

The red tide bloom off the coast of southern Sarasota County is as potent as the one that rocked Tampa Bay earlier this summer, which he said has been the worst red tide in that area since the 1970s.

During his remarks Thursday, Tomasko reiterated his belief that the release of nutrient-rich wastewater from the former Piney Point fertilizer processing plant exacerbated the red tide

bloom in Tampa Bay, where Pinellas County officials have cleaned up about 1,800 tons of dead sea life.

Since Aug. 4, Sarasota County and the cities of Sarasota and Venice have cleaned up nearly 64 tons of red-tide-related marine debris from beaches.

By the way: Sarasota starts red tide cleanup effort, removing 1,500 pounds of dead fish

More: Manatee cleans 10 tons of dead fish off area beaches, Sarasota cleanups begin

On Thursday, the Florida Department of Health in Manatee County issued a no swim advisory for Bayfront Park North on Anna Maria Island.

“What happened in Piney Point was the worst thing that has happened in decades,” Tomasko said. “If we spend millions of dollars with stormwater retrofits and ribbon cuttings and getting people out there planting oysters, and then two miles down the road someone discharges 200 tons of nitrogen, then all that is for naught. So the regulators and the regulating community have to do a better job.”

Tomasko said local municipalities can upgrade aging wastewater and stormwater infrastructure to better maintain water quality. He said local residents can do their part as well, adding that most residents overfertilize or water their lawns more than necessary, creating nutrient-rich runoff water that eventually works its way into local ecosystems.

“The way to reduce red tide impacts is the same way to get the general health of the bay back, which is to manage nutrients, do a better job with stormwater, and do a better job with your lawn,” Tomasko said. “That’s the way we can make this a better bay.”