

Reel Time: Dangerous seagrass bill advances

By **Rusty Chinnis** - January 31, 2022



Florida Senate Bill 198 (Sen. A. Rodriguez, R- Doral) would allow permits that will impact seagrass and allow for replacing them elsewhere in state waters. Why is that a problem?

I posed that question to Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program. Tomasko has more than 30 years of experience in water quality assessments and the development of science-based natural resource plans in the Gulf of Mexico and internationally. With a Ph.D. in biology from the University of South Florida, a Master of Science in

marine biology from the Florida Institute of Technology, and a Bachelor of Science in biology from Old Dominion University, Tomasko is uniquely qualified to accurately assess these kinds of proposals.



Manatees feed on seagrass, which is threatened by state legislation in Tallahassee this month. – Rusty Chinnis | Sun

“The biggest issue is that the track record of transplanting seagrasses is poor,” Tomasko said. “Even if transplant areas gain some seagrass after planting, those that survive typically have lower densities than what they replaced. Typically, seagrass grows where it can, and for someone to grow new seagrass, something has to change – water quality must improve (very hard) or areas have to be made shallow enough to support seagrass (expensive) or wave attenuation devices have to be installed (also expensive and a nuisance to navigation). Many believe we can’t afford more losses, and so a system that makes it seem ‘acceptable’ for impacts because they can be ‘mitigated’ is not thought to be supportable by the facts or track record of such efforts. Seagrass restoration efforts in Florida have had a history of being both expensive and complex, with few success stories.”

The bill would make the destruction of seagrass permissible in Florida with mitigation banks. The bill might also open the door to allow healthy, undisturbed seagrass areas to be impacted by the construction of boat basins and navigation channels that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) has routinely denied for more than 30 years. There are many other mitigating factors. Considering the massive losses of seagrass in Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay, as well as statewide, and the unprecedented death of manatees in the Indian River Lagoon, this bill seems almost laughable to this author. Besides holding the potential of being a virtual death sentence for manatees, advancing legislation like this is unwise. To advocate planting seagrass without fixing the underlying impaired water affecting seagrasses statewide seems absurd.



Seagrass in the Intracoastal Waterway/Sarasota Bay could be impacted by proposed state legislation. – Cindy Lane | Sun

Despite all these issues, coupled with the apprehensions of environmentalists, the bill was approved by the Environment and Natural Resources Committee by a vote of 3 to 2 on Jan. 18. A House companion bill, HB 349, filed by Rep. Sirois (R-Merritt Island), passed its first committee of reference on Dec. 6, 2021, and is now headed to the Agriculture and Natural Resources Subcommittee.

I had a firsthand experience recently that drove home the potential harm of legislation like this on a trip to the east coast when my friend and fellow conservationist Captain Rodney Smith, of Satellite, took me to a popular manatee viewing area at DeSoto Park in Satellite Beach. The sight of hundreds of manatees grouped together in a shallow canal was mesmerizing. When I expressed my delight at seeing so many manatees at one time, nearby environmental filmmaker Dylan Hansen informed me that just a few years ago there were twice as many manatees there. Suddenly the plight of these manatees came into sharp focus.

Citizens who care about water quality both as a quality of life issue and from an economic perspective must speak out. The best way to do that is to contact your state [Senator](#) and your state [Representative](#) and encourage them to vote “no” on these potentially disastrous bills. It might have been argued at one time that we need to strike a balance on issues like this, but that time has passed. We’ve kicked the can down the road until we’ve run out of road. Either we take the initiative or we suffer the consequences that inaction may bring.

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