

RED TIDE

Could red tide become a problem after Hurricane Ian?

As Florida continues to clean up in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, experts are eyeing water quality along the gulf coast.



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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Researchers and scientists along the Gulf coast are monitoring water conditions in the Tampa Bay area in case red tide starts to emerge.

“This is a different storm, much bigger, much more rainfall, much more widespread damage. So we’re really not sure exactly what the heck is going to happen,” said David Tomasko, the executive director of the [Sarasota Bay Estuary Program](#).

Tomasko says they are monitoring very unusual conditions in Sarasota Bay.

“The whole bottom of our bays are receiving very little oxygen, and at the same time, the surface waters seem to be having an algal bloom. So we have an algal bloom of the brackish water on the top, and then we have low oxygen across what appears to be a very large area along the bottom,” he said.

There are more than 800 miles of beach along the Gulf coast. While [red tide](#) hasn't been detected yet, the reverse storm surge and all the wastewater flowing into the Gulf make future implications unclear.

Right now, bacteria is the main concern.

"We have dogs, we have failed wastewater treatment systems. We have porta-potties tipped on their sides all over the place. We have septic tank systems that aren't working because the water table is too high," Tomasko said.

For businesses along the beachfront, another red tide event would be the worst-case scenario.

"If you get red tide like we had, I believe it was last year or a year before, it was very detrimental to anyone's business," said Rick Falkenstein, the owner of Hurricane's Seafood Restaurant on Pass-a-Grille Beach.

However, current conditions don't necessarily mean red tide is imminent.

"It's rained so much that we're picking up water that has a chemistry of rainfall rather than urban runoff, and so it could be that we have so much water coming in here. That it's going to dilute a lot of what could be a massive problem," Tomasko said.

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Right now, experts say the full picture of Hurricane Ian's impact to the water remains to be seen.

"If we don't have a red tide, then maybe we're going to get through this not that bad. And that's what everyone is hoping for, but we're prepared for it to not be that way," Tomasko said.

In the meantime, those who work on the water will have to watch — and wait.

"We just kind of take it in stride, you know. It's something we really don't have any control over so you just kind of hope for the best," said Stanton Chevalier, who owns Wharf Restaurant on Pass-a-Grille Beach.

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