

Bacteria outbreak after Ian tells a scary story about Florida's broken sewage systems

Spills happen all the time from overloaded plants and pipes, not just after a hurricane.

Halloween is once again looming over us like a dark shadow, bidding us to buy tons of tooth-rotting candy, dress up in weird outfits (sexy Bob Ross, anyone?), and decorate our houses with skeletons, ghosts, and monsters. It's also a time for telling scary stories.

Here's one that should scare the bejabbers out of you: Lee County, the place where Hurricane Ian slammed ashore three weeks ago, is suffering from a record-breaking epidemic of Vibrio vulnificus, sometimes known (incorrectly) as "flesh-eating bacteria."

"Lee County's 29 cases and four deaths are the most in the state in both categories," the Fort Myers News-Press reported this week. The statewide total, which includes numbers from other counties smacked around by Ian: a startling 65.

Every time a hurricane hits Florida — and they hit here more than any other state — we longtime Floridians know that certain stories inevitably follow in the weeks afterward. I don't mean the videos of guys whooping and hollering while riding their wakeboards or Jet Skis down the flooded streets. (Although yes, that happens.)

I mean the stories about the sketchy clean-up contracts, the boom in disease-bearing mosquitoes because of all the standing water and, of course, the multiple stories about sewage spills.

But this is the first time I have seen one of the follow-ups be "allegedly flesh-eating bacteria cases break record." Turns out it did happen before, though. The previous record was set in 2017, after Hurricane Irma.

According to health officials, the infections, which can destroy soft tissue (a condition called necrotizing fasciitis – now there’s a Halloween term for you), are connected to those multiple sewage spills. Those occurred all over the state.

“Ian’s sewage geysers into neighborhoods, gushes into environment,” reported the **Orlando Sentinel**. “Power outages from Hurricane Ian cause slew of wastewater spills across Polk,” noted The **Ledger**, in Lakeland. “Ian caused 7.2M-gallon sewage spill into Indian River Lagoon, Brevard leaders say,” read the headline on the **WKMG-TV website**.

The stinkiest story I saw came from the **Bradenton Herald**: “Hurricane Ian forces Bradenton to release 13 million gallons of sewage into Manatee River.”

Hey, who wants to go for a swim? Yeah, me neither.

All of the stories went into some graphic detail about what went into our waterways.

“At least 330,000 gallons of wastewater – enough to fill more than 13 average swimming pools – were spilled into Tampa waters over an 18-hour period that ended on Sept. 29, according to Florida Department of Environmental Protection reports filed by the City of Tampa Wastewater Department,” the **Tampa Bay Times** noted last week.

Then the paper added: “In one instance, a pumping station ... in Tampa lost power for 18 hours during the storm. Crews were able to fire up a backup generator, but more than 138,000 gallons of wastewater already had been dumped ... into Hillsborough Bay.”

I really would rather not picture any swimming pools full of poop, much less 13 of them. But that’s where we’re at now – and not for the first time, either, because it doesn’t take a hurricane to “force” Florida cities to dump their sewage.

“Silent Spring” but for fish

After reading all those poop-in-the-pool stories – which of course reminded me of the **famous Baby Ruth scene in “Caddyshack”** – I was surprised to learn that a scientist I know named **Dave Tomasko** had been out wading around in all that mess.

Tomasko’s own house in Palmetto dodged any damage from Ian, he told me. But he saw that people in the southern Sarasota County community of **North Port** had been clobbered. As a result, he and a neighbor ventured down to pass out food, gas, and other emergency supplies.

As soon as they arrived, he noticed the stench.

Tomasko realized he was standing in water that was not just tainted by sewage and septic tank waste. There were dead animals lying in the flood waters. Cars and trucks were leaking gasoline, oil, and battery acid. Meanwhile, a row of four Port-a-Potties had been knocked over.

“And there were loads of people splashing around in this,” said Tomasko, Executive Director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

As a result, he started setting up — as best he could, given the circumstances — a water quality monitoring network that stretches from Sarasota Bay down to Bonita Springs. The goal: Find out how much Ian messed up all the waterways that are so important to the region’s tourism, fishing, and other economic pursuits.

What they have found so far is — well, let’s just say the post-hurricane supply kit should contain some clothespins to clip your nostrils shut. And you definitely should not walk around in any of this stuff.

“The water,” he told me, “is not good right now.”

When I asked for examples, he said, “The Peace River doesn’t hardly have any oxygen in it. We’ve lost all the sport fish in the Peace River.”

Hey, there’s another scary scenario for your Halloween. It’s like the title tale in **Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring,”** but fish, not birds, are what’s missing.

The length of time for these bodies of water to begin to bounce back runs from mere weeks to months on end, Tomasko told me. What, I asked him, makes the difference?

“We learned after Irma that healthy systems are more resilient,” he said. “If the water body is stressed before the hurricane hits, then it has to take much longer to recover. If you think about it this way, everything we do to improve water quality is hurricane preparation.”

Yet many of Florida’s waterways are so stressed from the things we dump into them on a regular basis, I wonder if they will ever fully recover. Pretty scary thought, huh?

It takes a calamity

Although I often write about what’s wrong with Florida, I really do love this glittering and lovely place. I love our award-winning state parks, world-class beaches and, of course, our hilarious police log items, such as **“Florida man run over by own truck during road rage incident.”**

Yet we often tend to be the **Potemkin** State, a place where things are not quite what they seem. The best-known home in the state is the unoccupied theme park attraction known as Cinderella’s Castle. The **Southernmost Point** in Key West is not really the southernmost point. And our supposedly hard-working legislators get more lathered up about naming an **official state dessert** than fixing our affordable housing or property insurance crisis.

In times of disaster, though, the truth will get out.

Back in the 1980s and early '90s, South Florida real estate sales folk told buyers, “These houses are solid!” and “Our building code is as tough as they come!” and “Our builders never cut corners!”

Then, in 1992, Hurricane Andrew roared through South Florida and destroyed the façade. Andrew showed that South Florida homes were not built well, because of **a weak building code** and **unethical builders**.

This is what hurricanes do: Tear away the curtain and show you what's been going on behind the scenes.

I hope Hurricane Ian does that with our sewage systems. I hope it's showing everyone that the job our leaders are doing in **dealing with our poop** is, uh, er, um – oh let's be polite and call it "crappy," shall we?

These terrible sewage spills that ruin our waterways and sicken our populace don't just happen when hurricanes hit, according to **Todd Osborne**, a wetland biochemist at the University of Florida who has written about hurricanes and pollution.

"This is going on 24-7-365," he told me. "It takes a calamity to get everyone's attention."

Any heavy rainfall will make many of Florida's frequently overwhelmed sewage systems back up and break down, he said. Spills happen at sewer plants built 20 years ago that haven't seen a single upgrade, despite rapid development adding thousands of more users. Pipes break because they're being forced to carry a bigger load that they were designed to carry.

"We have failing sewers everywhere," said **Henry Briceno**, a professor who studies water quality at Florida International University's Southeast Environmental Research Center. Beaches closed for health reasons, spills, and fishkills "are the new norm."

Thus we get headlines like the July 2021 one that said, "Overflows cause **60,000 gallons of wastewater** to enter Tampa Bay area waterways" and the one in October 2021 that said, "**Mary Esther sewage spill** sent 50,000 gallons of wastewater into Santa Rosa Sound" and the November 2021 one that said, "Weekend's heavy rains caused sewer spills in parts of **Daytona Beach**, Holly Hill."

Over and over, our sewer systems break and the sewage spews into the waterways that are such a big part of our nature and industry. They're turned into cesspools that no tourist would ever want to dip a toe into.

Osborne pointed me to a website created by the newspaper Florida Today that tracks all the sewage spills reported in Florida. When I looked, there were so many dots showing ongoing spills across the state that it looked like particularly virulent case of chicken pox. You can **see it for yourself here**.

"The first time I looked at it," Osborne said, "I was aghast."

Fixing a broken system

When I was in Boy Scouts, we learned that duct tape could fix most anything. Got a hole in your tent? Patch it with duct tape. Hiking boots falling apart? Wrap 'em in duct tape. Is your canoe filling with water? Cover the leak with duct tape!

But I don't think there's enough duct tape in the world to fix Florida's broken sewage systems.

I talked to Osborne, Briceno, and several other experts about how we could make these stinky horror stories happen far less often. I heard some good ideas:

– Install backup power systems that don't need a human to crank them when the main power system goes out. That could be either a regular power source that kicks on automatically or one powered by solar panels. You may scoff at that last one, but **Babcock Ranch**, a solar-powered city in Charlotte County, never lost electricity during Ian.

– Line the pipes with a stronger, more modern material that's less likely to break than the old pipe material.

– Move the treatment plants away from frequently flooded, low-lying areas and don't let any new ones be built there. Briceno emphasized that one, pointing out that a rising sea level should put us all in the mind to retreat from the coast wherever possible.

– Don't allow new development that adds to the existing load that's going to an already overburdened sewage system until the new system can be expanded.

– Eliminate **new septic tanks** entirely and connect the old ones to sewer lines pronto. Even when they do work, septic tanks' goal is to keep the sewage from backing up into the house, not to protect the environment, noted **Robert Knight** of the Florida Springs Institute.

"They pollute way out of proportion to the cost," Knight said.

Of all the ideas I heard, the most intriguing one was to change our standards for what constitutes treated sewage.

Bring on the candy bars!

One of the experts I checked with was **Estus Whitfield**, who served as principal environmental adviser to six Florida Governors and then became a founding member of the Florida Conservation Coalition. Instead of immediately answering my questions about improving the system, he told me a story.

"My first job out of college was in Okaloosa County sanitation," he said. "The main job included septic tank and treatment plant inspections."

That's where he learned something most people don't know, he said.

"Septic tanks and treatment plants were designed for basic public health, keeping us safe from disease and sewage backups in the house – not environmental protection," he told me.

"That purpose remains today."

Whitfield's statement struck me as odd, so I asked Osborne about it. He agreed with Whitfield. Our standards for sewage treatment call for treating it to a point that, if it were a lake, a scientist would call it **eutrophic**. In other words, a place devoid of aquatic life.

When Florida cities or counties spill a load of sewage, public officials try to make it sound better by pointing out that it was “partially treated.” But if the standard for treated sewage is not good for the environment, then partially treated sewage would be worse, wouldn’t it?

Clearly, we need to upgrade our treatment standards to something more protective of fish and other water-dwellers.

If we want our waterways to be healthy enough to bounce back quickly from the next lan, we need to do all this and do it now. Classify it as “environmental upgrades” or “hurricane preparedness” or “battling flesh-eating bacteria” – it’s what we have to do.

“Wait,” you may be saying, “you want to upgrade treatment standards, increase the capacity of existing treatment plants, relocate the ones in flood-prone areas, revamp the lines, add solar panels to the backup systems – won’t that cost a lot of money?”

Of course. And that’s been the excuse for doing none of it. But do you really want to risk being the next victim of a bacteria that attacks your soft tissue and, maybe, kills you? It’s like volunteering to be the next person to play with **Chucky the doll**.

I think our developers, who have been making big bucks in **our hot housing market** by adding more homes and businesses to the burden of our treatment plants for so long, would be a good source of funding for all of that. Surely they’d want to avoid the bad publicity going on now.

Speaking of money, I have a suggestion for how we can get our perpetually foot-dragging legislators to go along with all these upgrades, one fully in keeping with the candy-intensive Halloween vibe right now.

I propose we tell them if they don’t pass legislation to fix our sewer systems in the next Legislative Session, then the only way they can collect any campaign contributions for the next election cycle is by swimming across an average-size pool.

One that’s full of Baby Ruth bars.

Craig Pittman reporting via **Florida Phoenix**.

Florida Phoenix is part of States Newsroom, a network of news bureaus supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity. Florida Phoenix maintains editorial independence. Contact Editor Diane Rado for questions: **info@floridaphoenix.com**. Follow Florida Phoenix on **Facebook** and **Twitter**.

Bacteria

Hurricane Ian

Infection Sewage

Sewage Systems

Storm Recovery

Vibrio Vulnificus

Related Articles

2022

'This is Florida under Ron DeSantis': Charlie Crist ad lambastes Gov. over incest report

EMAILS & OPINIONS

Sunburn – The morning read of what's hot in Florida politics – 10.21.22

2022 - CONGRESSIONAL

Alan Cohn, Laurel Lee spar on abortion, immigration as accusations fly



Florida Phoenix

Florida Phoenix is a news and opinion outlet focused on government and political news coverage within the state of Florida.

PREVIOUS

Sunburn – The morning read of what's hot in Florida politics – 10.20.22



3 comments



Mike

📅 October 20, 2022 at 9:59 am

Who wrote this horrible article? Go back to school and take a writing class.

↩ REPLY



It's great i tell you

📅 October 20, 2022 at 5:11 pm

Oh mike.

You can't go back to school. Ian got rid of them

↩ REPLY



Impeach Biden

📅 October 20, 2022 at 12:00 pm

Fake News. There is no bacteria in the water.

Bacteria don't exist, and neither do viruses.

↩ REPLY



Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

Comment *

Name *

Email *

Website

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

Florida Politics is a statewide, new media platform covering campaigns, elections, government, policy, and lobbying in Florida. This platform and all of its content are owned by Extensive Enterprises Media.

Publisher: Peter Schorsch @PeterSchorschFL

Contributors & reporters: Phil Ammann, Renzo Downey, Roseanne Dunkelberger, A.G. Gancarski, Anne Geggis, Kelly Hayes, Joe Henderson, Ryan Nicol, Jacob Ogles, Gray Rohrer, Jesse Scheckner, Christine Sexton, Andrew Wilson, Wes Wolfe, and Mike Wright.

Email: Peterschorsch@floridapolitics.com

Twitter: @PeterSchorschFL

Phone: (727) 642-3162

Address: 204 37th Avenue North #182

St. Petersburg, Florida 33704

Email

Type your email address here

Subscribe

Coronavirus

Communities

2022

Legislative

Federal

Emails & Opinions
