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Guest opinion: State must reduce human impacts on red tide in Florida

Matt DePaolis Special to The News-Press

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On May 4, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced the approval of nearly \$14 million for red tide mitigation. The funding will be spread across the state for monitoring, research, prevention, control, and mitigation efforts. This historic level of funding is a welcome relief to the communities where the peril of harmful algal blooms is always looming.

While reacting to red tide is imperative, recent research has proven that by allowing nutrients to flow into our waterways, we are exacerbating these blooms. To truly mitigate this constant threat the state must also work to reduce nutrient inputs into our waters.

As barrier island communities, residents of Sanibel and Captiva are acutely aware of the disastrous effect that red tide has on our lives. Mentioning 2018 on the islands elicits a shudder from both environmentalists and the business community alike. The memory of tons of dead sea life washing ashore and thousands of tourists cancelling their vacations is still fresh in our collective mind.

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At the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) we are seeking to better understand red tide by conducting monthly sampling of the entire Caloosahatchee. Our partnership with Mote Marine Lab has led to the development of a continuous monitoring system which aims to establish a baseline for *Karenia brevis*, the organism responsible for red tide. We have also been active participants throughout the Army Corps' Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM) process.

In his announcement, the governor highlighted the importance of controlling the discharges from Lake Okeechobee to coasts to mitigate harmful algal blooms. Throughout the development of LOSOM, SCCF has provided science-based recommendations to the Army Corps of Engineers to ensure the new plan is equitable and maximizes freshwater flows south to the Everglades, while reducing the damaging discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

A study by the University of Florida, SCCF, and the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program has drawn an explicit connection between anthropogenic nitrogen and the intensification of red tide blooms in our coastal estuaries. By reducing harmful flows from Lake Okeechobee, we can help to minimize the damage that red tide causes to our community.

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Controlling harmful water releases from Lake Okeechobee is not the only source of nitrogen and other nutrients feeding harmful algal blooms. Agricultural and urban runoff, excessive fertilizer use, aging septic systems, and other nutrient sources remain large inputs of nitrogen into our watersheds and coastal areas.

Reducing nutrients at their source through wetland protection, agricultural and urban best management practices (BMPs), and conversion from septic to central sewer will also help mitigate harmful algal blooms like blue-green algae and red tide. Individual homeowners can utilize native plants, stop applying fertilizer, and eliminate excessive watering from their lawn care. And everyone can support new legislation that protects the health of our waters.

While individual actions are helpful, the problem is too large to solve with personal accountability alone. We need continued state and federal support for projects like the C43 and EAA reservoirs to send much needed water to the Everglades. Development permits should only be granted after thorough environmental review to ensure further damage is minimized. Water boards should be trusted to use science rather than politics to provide equitable water allowances. To guarantee that science takes precedent over politics, Gov. DeSantis must veto SB 2508.

The approval of the red tide funds by the governor is a massive win for the health of our water. To ensure that they do not become a drop in the bucket of ever-increasing cleanup costs, all Floridians must aim to prevent harmful algal blooms and stem the flow of nutrients into our waters.

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