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The Storm

How Has Hurricane Ian Affected Sarasota's Water Quality?

Environmentalists say things will likely get worse before they get better.

By [Isaac Eger](#) September 30, 2022



A marooned sailboat near Siesta Key.

IMAGE: AP PHOTO/GERALD HERBERT

In the wake of [Hurricane Ian](#), which has led to stormwater and sewage discharge and large amounts of debris in local waterways, many are concerned about the effect the storm may have on the Gulf of Mexico, as well as our bays and estuaries.

Ragan Whitlock, a staff attorney for the [Center for Biological Diversity](#), says he's worried that the high winds and extreme rain may have compromised phosphate facilities in the Tampa Bay region. Last year's Piney Point disaster, [when 215 million gallons of polluted water were dumped into Tampa Bay and 300 homes had to be evacuated](#), compounds these fears.

“These releases can contribute to harmful algal blooms and degrade overall water quality, leading to ecosystem collapses like we've seen in the Indian River Lagoon, made painfully apparent last year by [the heartbreaking manatee die-off](#),” Whitlock says.

On Friday, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection released a statement on conditions at Piney Point, which received 6.74 inches of rain. The current storage capacity for additional rainfall at the site is approximately 21 inches. The state noted that there was a release of “clean, non-contact stormwater” into the outfall along Buckeye Road.

[Suncoast Waterkeeper](#) founder Justin Bloom says he hasn't heard anything about Piney Point yet, and that's a good sign, but the figure cited by the state likely isn't current.

"I doubt they've tabulated the amount of rainfall they've had over the last couple of days," Bloom says. "To me, it sounds like there was no release of water from the impoundments [bodies of water impounded within an enclosure, such as a reservoir]. Stormwater releases happens every day, and we've got issues with that because they don't have a permit."

Suncoast Waterkeeper, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Tampa Bay Waterkeeper, Manasota-88 and Our Children's Earth Foundation have all filed a federal case against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, HRK Holdings (the company that owns Piney Point) and the Manatee Port Authority for this unpermitted release of stormwater. But Bloom does not believe such releases will have a large impact on the Gulf or nearby waterways.

Piney Point is just one concern, however. Other threats loom.

"I anticipate we are going to have some pretty significant deterioration of water quality starting next week, and it will probably last for a few months," Bloom says. One factor will be sewage discharges caused by overwhelmed stormwater facilities.

"The City of Bradenton sewage treatment plant is bypassing the treatment plant," Bloom says. "All the sewage that would normally go into their plant is going into the Manatee River."

But Bloom says the lion's share of the pollution will come from slowly decaying debris like branches, leaves, dog poop and whatever other organic matter the storm sweeps up.

Dave Tomasko, the executive director of the [Sarasota Bay Estuary Program](#), cites a paper that he and state agencies wrote that investigated the impacts of 2004's Hurricane Charley on the water quality of the Peace River and Charlotte Harbor. They found that "all the green foliage from trees was washed into the creeks and bays and resulted in spikes in bacteria, nutrient loads and subsequent crashes in levels of dissolved oxygen in the days and weeks afterwards," Tomasko says.

The areas that will be most negatively effected will be areas that do not flush quickly into the Gulf of Mexico, like Palma Sola Bay and Little Sarasota Bay. Tomasko believes that between mid-October and November, our water quality will likely improve.

Bloom echoes that belief. "We are going to see poor water quality for a good amount of time," he says. "I wouldn't be swimming for the next week or so." Until then, Bloom recommends that residents check in with Suncoast Waterkeeper and the Department of Health for regular water quality monitoring.

Bloom and Tomasko plan to go out this weekend to do an assessment of Sarasota's water. "We should be able to get back to normal from Hurricane Ian," Bloom says. "But the more resilient the bay, the better it can recover from this."

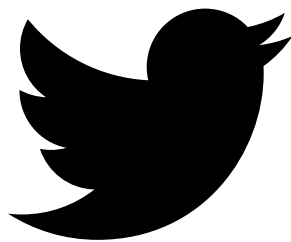
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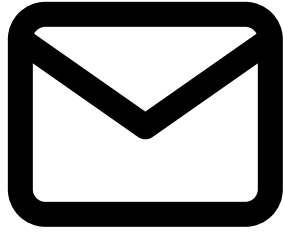
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