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LOCAL

## Seagrass is dying by Tampa and Sarasota as red tide worsens. Is Florida doing enough?

BY [RYAN BALLOGG](#) UPDATED MARCH 17, 2023 8:35 AM



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Manatee grass, scientific name *Syringodium filiforme*, is one species of seagrass commonly found in Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay. *FWC Fish and Wildlife Research Institute*



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-10:34

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New surveys of seagrass on Florida's Gulf Coast shows the vital marine plant is continuing to lose ground at a rapid pace in Tampa and Sarasota Bay.

Since 2016, the Southwest Florida Water Management District has documented losses of almost 30% of Tampa Bay's seagrass and around 26% in Sarasota Bay.

The decline comes after local waters were slammed with pollution from the Piney Point industrial site and severe red tides over the past several years.

But the seagrass losses also have increased despite many areas meeting state water quality targets, which environmentalists say need changing.

Scientists say action must be taken to prevent Tampa and Sarasota's seagrass ecosystem from collapsing like the one in the Indian River Lagoon on Florida's east coast, where [manatee deaths are highest](#).

## **IMPORTANCE OF SEAGRASS**

Any ecologist will tell you that seagrasses are one of the ocean's MVPs (most valuable plants).

From sheltering and feeding marine life to storing carbon and preventing erosion, the marine greens are a vital part of the ecosystem — not to mention the preferred produce of the iconic Florida manatee.

Unfortunately, seagrass meadows are also one of the [most imperiled](#) ecosystems in the world; climate change, pollution, [red tides](#) and other human-influenced problems are top threats.

A die-off is now playing out on Florida's Gulf Coast, where seagrass meadows are disappearing at an alarming rate.

Scientists take it as a warning sign for the overall health of area waters.

“It’s further evidence that we really need to get our act together quickly,” said David Tomasko, executive director of the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.

## **ARE WATER QUALITY STANDARDS STRONG ENOUGH?**

In Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay, the seagrass losses came despite many areas meeting state water quality targets.

“Old Tampa Bay and Hillsborough Bay are examples of that,” said Chris Anastasiou, chief scientist of water quality and the lead of seagrass mapping efforts for the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD). “We

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