



May 8, 2021

Office of Governor Ron DeSantis
State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor DeSantis:

Harmful algal blooms are again threatening public health, local economies and ecosystems of Florida. Lake Okeechobee has become the Florida epicenter of algal blooms, and discharge of these toxic blooms from the Lake is contaminating the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers and associated waterways.

Key events this spring illustrate the growing threat to Floridians:

- April 2, 2021: the US Army Corps of Engineers issued a Notice to Navigation for the entire Okeechobee Waterway, warning that recreational and commercial vessels could encounter blue-green algae that can sicken people and animals.
- April 19, 2021: the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) reported levels of the toxin microcystin had reached 120 parts per billion (ppb) on Lake Okeechobee near the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Structure 308, 15 times higher than the EPA recreational guideline of 8 ppb.
- April 26, 2021: FDEP reported the microcystin concentration at the Lake Okeechobee Pahokee Marina had reached 860 ppb, 107 times the EPA recreational guideline.
- May 1, 2021, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that the Lake Okeechobee blue-green algae bloom had expanded to an estimated 300 square miles as indicated by satellite imagery.
- Other low-altitude aerial photography of Lake Okeechobee recorded by pilot Ralph Arwood and reported by Calusa Waterkeeper confirmed widespread and concentrated blue-green algae at the surface on April 7, April 30 and again on May 3.

Additionally, multiple blue-green algae health alerts indicating the presence of toxins, have been issued during the past three weeks for points along the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers, Lake Worth Lagoon, and other water bodies in the southern region of Florida. Compounding this crisis, an ongoing Gulf of Mexico red tide bloom occurring since November 2020, continues threatening public health at locations nearshore and in back bays of Southwest Florida causing fish and other marine life mortality. The ongoing Lake Okeechobee discharges to the Caloosahatchee River with high levels of blue-green algae could worsen the current red tide bloom by providing additional nutrients and acting as a nutritional source for the *Karenia brevis* dinoflagellate.

These co-occurring toxic blooms present the potential for a calamitous event that are likely to cause lasting damage to local economies and ecosystems throughout much of south Florida, similar to what occurred during 2018 and 2019. For example, during the 2018 blooms the Sanibel-Captiva Chamber of Commerce reported economic losses of approximately \$47 million from July through October and the City of Sanibel removed more than 425 tons of dead marine life from Sanibel's beaches, at a cost of \$1.6 million. Hurricane season begins June 1, bringing rainfall and rising temperatures that are conducive to the growth of toxic algae blooms. Now is the time to act.

Before the situation becomes potentially catastrophic, we ask that you issue an **EMERGENCY ORDER** in order to:

- waive any restrictions and regulations which constrain FDEP, SFWMD, Florida Department of Health and other relevant state agencies from working collaboratively to store or move more water south from Lake Okeechobee and away from heavily populated coastal areas;
- provide relief opportunities for affected homeowners and businesses;
- issue consistent and widespread on-site public notifications that clearly indicate health risks associated with the harmful blue-green algae blooms and red tide.

Respectfully,

Georgia Ackerman, Apalachicola Riverkeeper
Justin Bloom, Suncoast Waterkeeper
John Capece, Kissimmee Waterkeeper
Marisa Carrozzo, Conservancy of Southwest Florida
John Cassani, Calusa Waterkeeper
Mike Conner, Indian Riverkeeper
Reinaldo Diaz, Lake Worth Waterkeeper
James Evans, Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation
Jen Lomberk, Matanzas Riverkeeper
Jaclyn Lopez, Center for Biological Diversity
Andre Mele, Peace/Myakka Waterkeeper
Mark Perry, Florida Oceanographic Society
Lisa Rinaman, St. Johns Riverkeeper
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Calusa Waterkeeper Mission:
To Protect and Restore the Caloosahatchee River
from Lake Okeechobee to the Coastal Waters.

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