



Water quality in Sarasota County

One of the most significant challenges that Floridians face today is preserving the quality of their local waters, and everyone has a part to play.

In Sarasota County, water quality concerns have evolved from reducing pathogens to reducing nutrient pollution. Over the past 20 years, nitrogen - a nutrient that fuels algal growth - has doubled in Sarasota Bay. Although the concentration of nitrogen in Sarasota Bay is still low, the increase is a warning to us that we must do more to protect our bays and beaches. The recent red tide bloom highlighted the need for action.

There are multiple sources of nutrients flowing downstream into our bays. Research has shown that those sources include septic systems, stormwater, reclaimed water, fertilizer, air pollution, wastewater discharges as well as decaying plant material such as grass clippings, pet waste and soil erosion. Reducing nutrient pollution will not eliminate red tide, but it could reduce one of the sources that feed algae, producing cleaner water overall, which is a benefit to our economy, way of life and environment.

What the county is doing to protect water quality

Sarasota County has a long history of leadership in water quality initiatives addressing the various sources of pollution including:

- Investing in large-scale infrastructure projects like Dona Bay and Celery Fields to reduce flood risk and stormwater pollution while supporting the long-term drinking water supply and balancing the flow of freshwater into the ecosystem.
- Consolidating wastewater treatment into larger centralized systems.
- Regulating wastewater treatment plant performance countywide through delegation from the state.
- Transitioning more than 10,000 septic systems to central sewer in the Phillippi Creek Septic Replacement Program to improve treatment.
- Implementing policies on fertilizer and landscape management that establish a restricted season for nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers, requirements for slow-release nitrogen fertilizers the rest of the year, a fertilizer-free zone along waterbodies, mandatory training for commercial fertilizer applicators and prohibition of vegetative debris in stormwater systems.
- Implementing stormwater and environmental policies in proposed land-use changes and development. The policies cover issues related to water conservation, stormwater treatment, erosion, sediment runoff and protection of shorelines and native habitats including wetlands.
- Implementing sustainable transportation programs that reduce emissions from motor vehicles, which helps reduce atmospheric deposition of nitrogen.
- Leading by example in county operations through low-impact development (LID) in road projects, sustainable landscaping and integrated pest management practices at county facilities and parks, best practices in maintenance of stormwater infrastructure, and regular street sweeping.
- Providing education to residents, professionals and homeowner associations related to nutrient management, water pollution and conservation.
- Supporting the implementation of stormwater and sustainable landscaping projects in neighborhoods across the county through the Neighborhood Initiative Grant Program and Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team Program.

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- Conducting comprehensive, long-term water quality monitoring of bays and creeks with the data available on the Sarasota Water Atlas website.
- Partnering with national, regional and local organizations like the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Southwest Florida Water Management District and Florida Department of Environmental Protection to improve water quality.
- Advocating for state and federal policies and funding that support local and regional water quality.
- Pick up and properly discard pet waste in the garbage.
- Maintain your septic system and implement advanced treatment. If possible, hook up to the central sewer.
- Decrease soil erosion in your yard by maintaining healthy groundcover, rocks or mulch.
- Keep grass clippings, oak leaves and acorns out of drains and waterbodies.
- Increase pervious surface and let the water soak in wherever possible to reduce your runoff footprint. Pervious paver driveways can reduce stormwater pollution.

What you can do to protect water quality

While Sarasota County is working hard to support clean water, the actions of individuals and neighborhoods can also make some very significant improvements.

- Limit the use of fertilizer. Follow Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles. Don't fertilize unless necessary and be sure to skip nitrogen and phosphorus-based fertilizers from June 1-Sept. 30.
- Ensure your personal or homeowner association's irrigation practices limit water use to the amount appropriate for your landscape, no more than once per week. Consider installing a rain barrel system.
- Drive the most fuel-efficient vehicle possible to reduce nitrogen deposition or use public transportation, walk, bike or carpool whenever possible.
- Buy local produce from farms that apply Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services' Best Management Practices.
- Protect natural shorelines and wetland areas.
- Create, maintain and enhance shoreline buffers, living shorelines and littoral zones around stormwater ponds and along waterways.

Learn more and join the discussion at the Sarasota County Water Quality Summit on June 5.

Register now at scgov.net/waterqualitysummit.

