



Red Handed on Red Tide

How Rick Scott's neglect fueled Florida's 2018 algal blooms and other water quality issues

Photo: Red tide causes fish to wash up dead on Delnor-Wiggins Pass State Park beach in Naples

Summary

For eight years, Governor Scott has neglected opportunities to prevent and prepare for a red algae crisis that has reached three coasts. Now Floridians are paying the price of empty beaches, damaged coastal economies, and rising threats to the health of children and families.

Turning his back on Florida's beaches:

In 2011, Scott eliminated state funds for the Healthy Beaches program designed to test waters for bacteria and pollution that affects marine life, humans and pets. Then he stood silently by when the Trump Administration tried to eliminate federal funding to keep Florida's beaches safe.



Missed opportunities:

Scott turned down a chance to acquire land needed to restore water flows to the Everglades—which would could help reduce algae blooms on the east and west coast of Florida.

On the sidelines:

Scott was silent when President Trump tried to eliminate the South Florida Geographic Initiative, which helps monitor algal blooms flowing into drinking water.

Not fighting for funding:

"The ocean is big business out here," said 36-year-old Richy Beck, as he unloaded a truck full of beach chairs Thursday at Haulover Beach. "It's bad for business, man. It means I'm going to be on the unemployment line."

Source: [Red Tide is Plaguing Beaches on Both of Florida's Coasts](#), Associated Press, October 4, 2018

When the White House tried to eliminate a water pollution prevention program that helps estuaries in Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and the Indian River Lagoon fight algal blooms, Governor Scott didn't lift a finger to protect the millions in federal funding that Florida receives (nearly \$12 million from 2012 to 2016).

Plenty of GOP governors have been fighting back against Trump Administration rollbacks of environmental safeguards and programs that help them fight water pollution that has jeopardized their coastal economies.

But Rick Scott has too much of a sweet tooth for Big Sugar. He's earned more than half a million dollars in their campaign support. He also delivered on their agenda—even if that means siding with polluters over the health of Florida's children and families.

Turning his back on Florida's beaches



In addition to the threat of algae, Florida's beaches face threats from sewage, including feces. Since 2001, federal BEACH Act funds have helped 30 Florida coastal counties strengthen water quality and conduct regular monitoring of intestinal bacteria from animal feces and human sewage, which can cause [rashes, gastro-intestinal illness, infections in the eyes, ears and nose, and disease](#).

Before Rick Scott ran for governor, Florida provided matching funds to protect Florida's beaches. But when Scott took office, **Florida ended its own support, and relied entirely on EPA's grants.**

Because Scott zeroed out state support for pollution monitoring, the water is not being tested as regularly as it was or needs to be. **Testing for enterococcus takes place only every other week** rather than every week (except in counties that have the ability and resources to pick up the slack).

Adequate monitoring also allows health officials to promptly reopen beaches after an outbreak—which is critical for Florida's tourist economy.

Last year, EPA funds were needed to test 243 Florida sites in the summer and 142 year-round.

But when President Trump worked to eliminate federal BEACH Act grants altogether, Scott said nothing. He exercised zero leadership at the helm of the state. And because he had already eliminated state support for water testing, he left county officials holding the bag.

Healthy Beaches funding source Summary

Year	General Revenue (State funds)	BEACH Act Grant (Federal funds)
2000-01	\$525,000.00	\$ -
2001-02	\$525,000.00	\$ 58,683.00
2002-03	\$525,000.00	\$ 530,893.00
2003-04	\$525,000.00	\$ 544,552.00
2004-05	\$525,000.00	\$ 540,222.00
2005-06	\$525,000.00	\$ 537,390.00
2006-07	\$525,000.00	\$ 528,410.00
2007-08	\$525,000.00	\$ 534,700.00
2008-09	\$525,000.00	\$ 526,320.00
2009-10	\$525,000.00	\$ 528,000.00
2010-11	\$525,000.00	\$ 531,000.00
2011-12	\$ -	\$ 552,000.00
2012-13	\$ -	\$ 516,000.00
2013-14	\$ -	\$ 488,800.00
2014-15	\$ -	\$ 500,000.00
2015-16	\$ -	\$ 496,000.00
2016-17	\$ -	\$ 495,000.00

"[Governor Scott] ordered budget cuts to water-management agencies for five consecutive years, dismantled the Department of Community Affairs, which regulated growth, and agreed to postpone cleaning up the lake."

Source: [As bouts with killer algae rose, Florida gutted its water quality monitoring network](#) Miami Herald, August 6, 2018

Opportunity lost: Scott bowed to Big Sugar instead of trying to prevent Lake Okeechobee's nutrients from fueling algal blooms

Lake Okeechobee's discharges have fueled algae blooms and hurt coastal fishing grounds. Rick Scott had the power in 2015 buy a key tract of land from U.S. Sugar to deal with problem, but they were against it and he didn't do it.

"Support for continuing the U.S. Sugar deal faded when Gov. Rick Scott took office....Big lake discharges to the east and west hurt coastal fishing grounds and can fuel toxic algae blooms that make waterways unsafe for swimming."

Source: [Water District Rejects Buying Sugar Land for Everglades Restoration](#), Sun Sentinel. May 14, 2015

[Experts say](#) that the cyanobacteria blooms happening in Martin and Lee Counties are directly connected to the lack of water flowing into the Everglades. That's why they proposed restoring water flows between the Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, and creating a reservoir to treat and store water.

"In the last seven years under Gov. Rick Scott... the state hobbled water quality management mechanisms that had been helping Lake Okeechobee... the Scott administration's willful resistance to regulations and its blind eye to the scientific study of the sources and causes of the algae blooms and red tide have evidently contributed to the plague of pollution in Florida's waters."

Source: Florida Sportsman, "[Dead in the Water](#)," August 22, 2018

As Governor, [Rick Scott had the power to buy 46,800 acres of farmland](#) south of Lake Okeechobee from U.S. Sugar to get water moving into the Everglades again. Florida's voters even approved a ballot measure designating funds to buy land for environmental purposes.

"Gov.-elect Rick Scott has made a last-minute attempt to push for a delay in implementing new water quality standards throughout the state."

Source: [Scott, GOP Leaders Join Chorus Of Voices Opposed To New EPA Water Quality Rules](#), The Florida Independent, January 19, 2016

But U.S. Sugar wanted to hold on to the land in order to make money by selling it to business developers and housebuilders. [Scott listened to Big Sugar](#), refusing to exercise the option to buy the land under a contract that U.S. Sugar signed in 2010 to let the state purchase its land.

"With Florida facing yet another Lake Okeechobee-related crisis, Gov. Rick Scott is trying to cleanse a seven-year record of environmental indifference."

Source: Editorial: [Gov. Scott's Spotty Record on Algae Crises](#), Florida Sun-Sentinel, July 10, 2018

Refusing to stand up for the South Florida Geographic Initiative

Since becoming president, Donald Trump has worked to eliminate the South Florida Geographic Initiative (SFGI), which for 25 years has made Florida's water cleaner and safer, reduced the size and frequency of algae blooms, and prevented the bleaching of Florida's coral reefs. The Trump Administration has twice proposed eliminating funding for SFGI.

- Florida's U.S. senators fought back against ending the SFGI. But **Scott stayed silent**.
- Republican governors around the country fought cuts to EPA programs and safeguards that protect the health of their children and families. But **not Rick Scott**.
- Why so acquiescent? Scott has [taken more than \\$600,000 in campaign support from sugar interests](#), including money raised during a fundraiser personally hosted by Florida Crystals president Pepe Fanjul.



Harmful bacteria makes water dangerous for human contact.

Why is the South Florida Geographic Initiative so important to fighting algae blooms?

- The SFGI monitors the flow of **toxic substances** like mercury and phosphorus into the Everglades, as well as Biscayne Bay, Florida Bay, the Caloosahatchee Estuary, the Indian River Lagoon, along with water along the Florida Reef Tract from Martin County through the Florida Keys.
- The SFGI also helps water quality managers monitor the level of nutrients poured into these waters by the **sugar industry**, since excess levels of nitrogen and phosphorus can trigger rapid algae growth, [endanger infants, and impair healthy breathing](#) by releasing ammonia and ozone into the air.



The devastating effects of the toxic algae blooms are leaving Florida's beautiful, white sandy beaches covered in dead fish.

Ignoring Estuary Protections and Watersheds in Need

Algal blooms poison Florida's estuaries by starving out nutrients that plants and animals need. Healthy estuaries support millions of families, thousands of jobs, and strong real estate values, even as they protect against rising sea levels and support irreplaceable wildlife habitat.

Federal funding is critical to preventing and restoring poisoned estuaries.

- The National Estuary Program has provided Florida with more than \$11 million from 2012-17 to protect estuaries in Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and the Indian River Lagoon.
- Federal support helped cut Sarasota Bay cut nitrogen pollution by 64 percent and diagnose an algae superbloom in the Indian River Lagoon.



Toxic algae blooms also endanger nesting habitats for Florida's wildlife

But when the Trump Administration worked to eliminate the National Estuary Program, Rick Scott never objected.



"Palm Beach and Martin counties closed several beaches after people reported symptoms of burning eyes and respiratory problems. On Thursday morning, Miami-Dade shut down beaches north of Haulover....People with severe or chronic respiratory conditions, such as emphysema or asthma, are urged to stay away from affected beaches."

Source: [Going to the beach? Here are five things to know about Florida's red tide](#), Miami Herald, October 4, 2018

Other GOP governors have fought for the health of their state's children and families

Scott's office may claim that it wasn't worth investing time to push back on Trump's proposed cuts. But **numerous Republican governors have fought back** against President Trump's unprecedented attempts to slash environmental safeguards that protect public health.

Larry Hogan (MD)

- During the federal budget debate, [Hogan attacked efforts](#) to defund EPA cleanup of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed. (Hogan [also urged the EPA](#) not to weaken clean car standards because of the threat to public health.)

Scott Walker (WI)

- [Governor Walker pushed back](#) against Trump administration efforts to cut funding for the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative.

Chris Sununu (NH)

- [Governor Sununu flew to Washington](#) to personally urge Trump Administration officials to abandon efforts to slash funding for environmental programs that protect New Hampshire families.

Phil Scott (VT):

- The governor [condemned the Trump EPA's plan](#) to roll back the Clean Power Plan.

Charlie Baker (MA) & Phil Scott (VT):

- The two governors came out with [a joint statement condemning](#) the Trump Administration's plan to leave the Paris Climate Agreement.

"Scott has bulldozed a record of environmental protection that his Republican and Democratic predecessors spent decades building."

Source: [The Rick Scott record: an environmental disaster.](#)
Tampa Bay Times, September 5, 2014