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'A Government-Sponsored Disaster': Florida Asks For Federal Help With Toxic Algae

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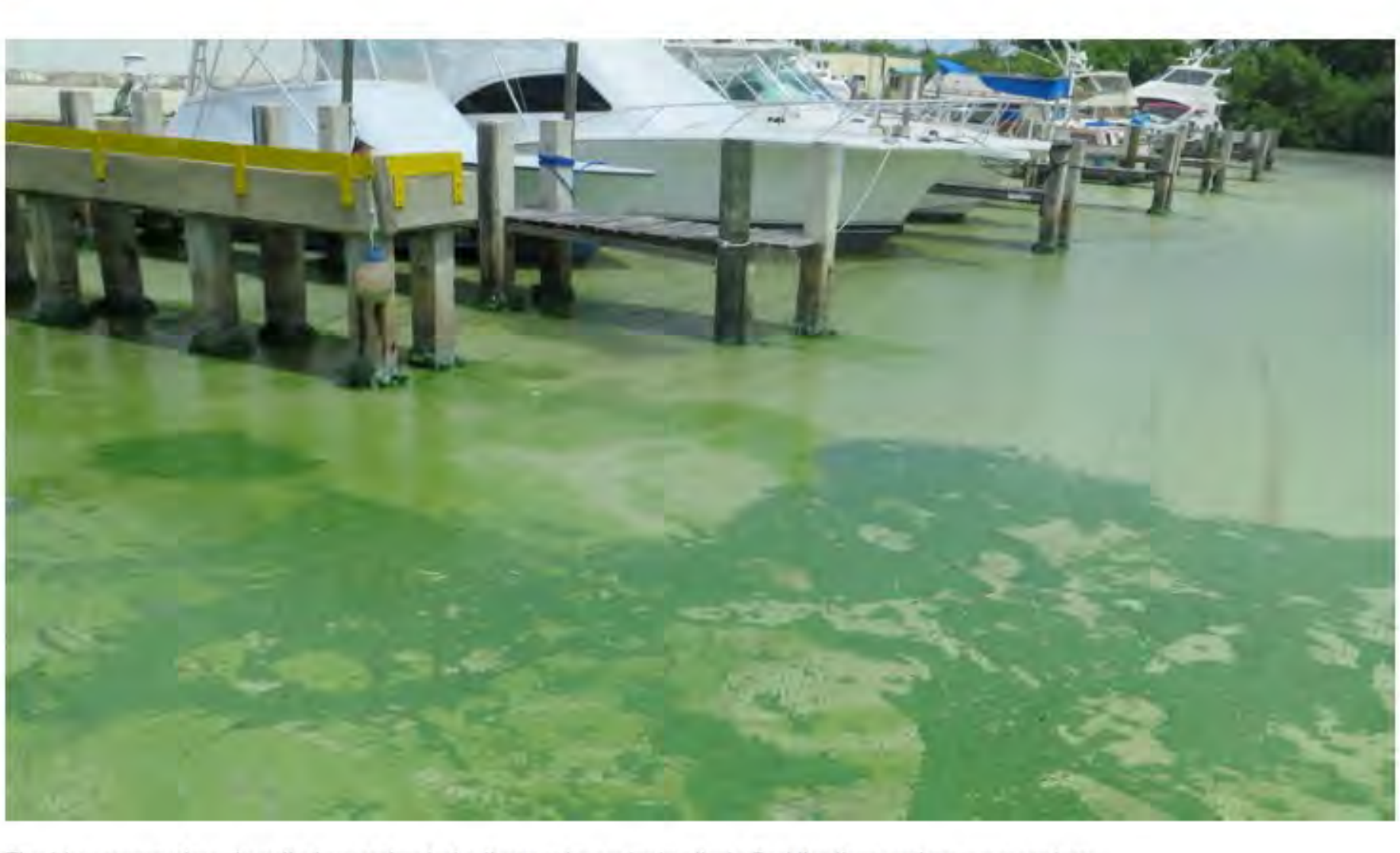
GREG ALLEN



The blue-green algae is called cyanobacteria. It can release toxins that affect the liver and nervous system.
Greg Allen/NPR

About a hundred miles north of Miami on the Atlantic Coast, the town of Stuart is a picturesque waterfront community — with homes, restaurants and parks overlooking the St. Lucie Estuary. But in many areas now, when you approach the water, the first thing you notice is the smell.

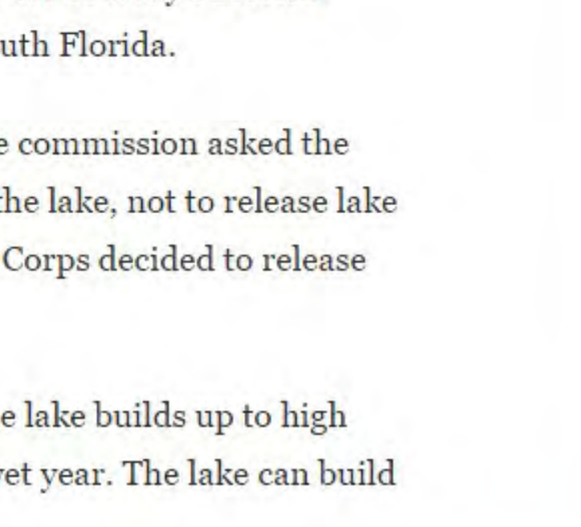
"There's no way to describe it," says John Skinner, a boat salesman in Stuart.

But he still tries. "I would say hundreds of dead animals that have been baking in the sun for weeks."

The cause of the foul smell is a massive algae bloom that has affected beaches and fishing in communities along the St. Lucie River. The blue-green algae is especially worrisome because it can be toxic and harmful to people and animals that come into contact with it.

In Stuart, Skinner says a thick layer of the blue-green algae began accumulating on the water in the marina last month. It's now a couple of inches thick in some areas — a greenish muck that coats the docks and the boats. He says the muck is hurting his sales.

"I have people that have bought boats and don't want to put it in the water," Skinner says. "And people who don't want to buy a boat because it's disgusting in there. They don't want to put it in. It stains the boats, it smells horrible and it's toxic."



"It stains the boats, it smells horrible and it's toxic," says the boat salesman John Skinner.
Greg Allen/NPR

It's called blue-green algae, but it's actually a type of bacteria called cyanobacteria. It typically thrives in freshwater. Under certain conditions, the bacteria can release a wide variety of toxins that affect the liver and nervous system.

And blue-green algae occurs naturally. But Mike Conner of the environmental advocacy group Bullsugar.org says there's little natural about this case. "This is a man-made — this is a government-sponsored disaster," he says.

In Ed Fielding's view, this is a natural disaster, but one that also involves politics. "We watched the algae come down the locks into the St. Lucie," he says.

Fielding is a member of the Martin County Commission, which includes Stuart and surrounding communities. The bloom of blue-green algae first showed up months ago in Lake Okeechobee, which occupies part of the county. It's the country's second-largest freshwater lake and a catch basin for central and South Florida.

Fearful that the algae bloom could spread, Fielding says the commission asked the Army Corps of Engineers, the federal agency that controls the lake, not to release lake water east into the St. Lucie River. Citing public safety, the Corps decided to release the water anyway.

"We are one of the exit valves, the safety valves for when the lake builds up to high levels," Fielding explains. "It was an enormously unusual wet year. The lake can build up six times faster that we're able to release."

Florida Gov. Rick Scott has asked President Obama to declare a federal emergency and make federal emergency funds available to deal with the algae bloom.
Greg Allen/NPR

The Corps is keeping the water level low in Lake Okeechobee to prevent a possible breach of the 80-year-old earthen dike that surrounds the lake — a breach that could be catastrophic and lead to flooding in nearby communities.

Because of the massive algae bloom, Florida Gov. Rick Scott has asked President Obama to declare a federal emergency and make federal emergency funds available.

Commissioner Fielding believes a declaration would also enable the president to do something local and state officials can't do — stop the release of lake water into the St. Lucie River. The Corps, which controls it, is under federal authority.

Environmental groups say the long-term solution is to restore the region's natural flow — and send water from Lake Okeechobee south through lands farmed by some of the nation's largest sugar producers.

Florida signed a deal to buy some of those sugar lands eight years ago, but Gov. Scott has not followed through. In 2014, voters approved an amendment that set aside money to acquire the land.

"The state is not taking the leadership and saying the citizens have spoke," says Mark Perry, executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society, an environmental education and research center in Stuart. He thinks Gov. Scott needs to do more.

"We need to uphold their interests and do the right thing — and that is, buy the land and send the water south."

While officials, environmentalists, and business interests point fingers over who's to blame, they all agree that with warm weather and continued releases of water from Lake Okeechobee, the bloom of toxic algae in the St. Lucie Estuary is likely to persist for the foreseeable future.

blue green algae lake okeechobee water florida

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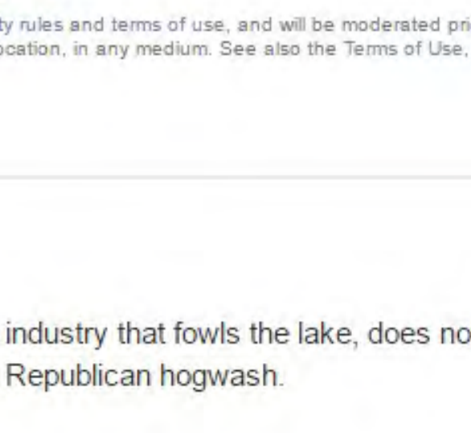

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stevenjv · 2 days ago
Rick Scott takes campaign contributions from the industry that fowls the lake, does not want big government (EPA) and now comes crying that the government is responsible. Republican hogwash.
67 · Share ›

Henry Parker → stevenjv · 2 days ago
That's capitalism at its best. Looking out for its own self-interest, poo-pooing government regulation to protect safety, and then when crisis occurs, the people that made money off of fouling the environment aren't asked to pay up. The people are.
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ProgressiveEngineer → Henry Parker · a day ago
Privatize the gains, socialize the losses.
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Mark J → Henry Parker · a day ago
Republicans: Religiously free-market until suddenly their state needs money.
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JanaStacy → Mark J · 17 hours ago
Except it isn't free market and hasn't been since the beginning. It is cronyism and subsidization of "select" businesses by those elected with those corporate funds.
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freetrump sings → Henry Parker · a day ago
cheap taxpayers that wont pay for sewage treatment
1 · Share ›

Mars S → freetrump sings · a day ago
This isn't sewage related but nice try at blaming someone.
2 · Share ›

Lindy Lindy → freetrump sings · 3 hours ago
It happens yearly in Lake Erie too. It comes mostly from the Maumee River in the US and fouls the Canadian side too. It's mostly caused by farm fertilizer run off into the water, the phosphates.
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Richard Stollberg → stevenjv · 2 days ago
Let the federal government pay for it! But wait, the federal government gets its money from all of us. OK, so pay for it but don't raise our taxes - take the money from some other wasteful federal programs, like infrastructure repair or the NIH and CDC. Right on Al F, too. "We have met the enemy, and he is us" - Pogo
7 · Share ›

freetrump sings → Richard Stollberg · a day ago
red state prblems

looking for blue state money
5 · Share ›

Mars S → freetrump sings · a day ago
You're just a basket of nonsense, aren't you.
1 · Share ›

freetrump sings → Mars S · a day ago
youd tired of the obama gargle

cause hillary will run yer life fur duh next 8 years
Share ›

Mars S → freetrump sings · 18 hours ago
I can see grammar and spelling are somewhat elusive for you. Would that be because your parents bought gunz instead of letting you read books?
1 · Share ›

S B → stevenjv · 2 days ago
Rick Scott and Florida are a mess

Glad I don't spend any time there
4 · Share ›

Mars S → S B · a day ago
They are too.
1 · Share ›

Clevingeresque → stevenjv · 2 days ago
Precisely.
1 · Share ›

freetrump sings → stevenjv · a day ago
farmers
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Mars S → stevenjv · a day ago
Whatever Scott's shortcomings are, he didn't cause this and deflecting to his politics is nothing but a distraction. The algae bloom was caused by freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee abd that was ordered by the Army Corps of Engineers, for good reasons, mind you but its not Scott's fault and your pretending party has some blame is hogwash.
Share ›

Chan Hol → Mars S · a day ago
Did you read the article on where the water should flow, that voters approved funds to buy the land, and Scott has not acted? While the bloom may not be his fault, he has blocked the solution that may have prevented it from spreading.
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JanaStacy → Chan Hol · 17 hours ago
I have noticed that teagops don't do very well with their reading/comprehension skills.
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Mars S → Chan Hol · 18 hours ago
I'm no fan of Scott's but he didn't cause this or keep it from spreading. Friend of mine from Palm Beach called me weeks ago when this first showed up, then it got worse and worse because water in the big lake is high and they didn't want to chance a flood should a hurricane have come along. What would have kept it from spreading was not releasing the water. The ACoE did it anyway. Incidentally, the highest source of mortality for manatees has historically been flood gates.
Share ›

Lindy Lindy → Mars S · 3 hours ago
Where did you get that manatee nonsense? It's boat props that kill most of the Manatee. They almost all have slices in their backs from the props.
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The Original DB · 2 days ago
Why is it that Republican politicians continually decry the overreach of the federal government in their demand for states' rights, but when it comes to blame they are never willing to accept any responsibility for the incompetence that caused the problem in the first place? Had the commissioners of Martin County (FL) or Governor Rick Scott taken steps to mitigate the algae when it first appeared many months earlier in Lake Okeechobee they would not now be dealing with a disaster of this magnitude. These dunderheads live in a coastal community surrounded by waterways everywhere they turn. It's not like the dangers of algae growth is a mysterious and foreign topic of conversation for them. At this point in time, I say we let them stew (literally) in their own juices.
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David Luesley → The Original DB · 2 days ago
Because they are selfish hypocrites perhaps?
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Abbi Baily → The Original DB · 2 days ago
Why are small children (or adults with the moral maturity and intellect of children) such a poor choice for leadership positions?
Maybe if Joey or Ricky screams when asked to share his toys, he isn't the best choice for public office.
Just a dry observation.
12 · Share ›

The Original DB → Abbi Baily · 2 days ago
As a very big fan of "dry observations," let me go on records as stating that yours are invariably spot on!
4 · Share ›

Abbi Baily → The Original DB · 2 days ago
Thank you. :-)
Florida used to be a neat place.
Sad what humans have done to it.
8 · Share ›

Touchstone Farm → Abbi Baily · a day ago
Sad what the GOP has done to it...for the sake of the almighty dollar.
3 · Share ›

Mars S → Touchstone Farm · a day ago
The GOP didn't do this. Maybe if you bother reading the story you'll find the passage about the Army Corps of Engineers doing water releases.
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Lindy Lindy → Mars S · 3 hours ago
Why did they build Lake O in the first place....to put the water they drained from the land for sugar farms where it naturally drained in the first place.
Share ›

PhilZoda → Mars S · 14 hours ago
Maybe if YOU'd take a minute to read the article, you'd see that your wonderful governor Mr. Scott has had the approval and the funds to correct this situation and has done NOTHING. But, no, just go on and blissfully accuse others of being misinformed.
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Mars S → PhilZoda · 13 hours ago
Well, no, the solution would not have been to raise the dike. I guess you're one of those people who skipped civics class.
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Lindy Lindy → Mars S · 3 hours ago
They can't raise the dike as it's unstable to begin with.
Share ›

zinnspeak → The Original DB · 2 days ago
Isn't Scott one of those republican governors that complaint about Big Bad Federal Government imposing on State Rights? So I guess a state has every the right to not take care of its own problems. I hope the Big Bad Government lets him beg on his knees and apologize for disparaging officials appointed by leaders freely elected by the people of this great nation and for asking the rest of us to pay for Florida's failures.
5 · Share ›

Mars S → zinnspeak · a day ago
Considering that the Federal Gov't caused this, they bear some considerable responsibility.
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david · 2 days ago
Environmental Impact Statements are NOT evil machinations from the "liberals". They ARE informed, scientifically based statements of the "potential" effects of human activity. Filling Lake Okeechobee with ridiculous amounts of phosphorus laden run-off produced a bubbling pot that has now overflowed. It has been the mantra of myopic Republicans, for more than forty years, that environmental protection equals economic disaster, and, is just another example of "governmental interference" in the "free market". First, we no longer have a "free market", but a market that is controlled by plutocrats and oligarchs and the rapacious "profit motive". Second, we have an overabundance of political prostitutes that are NOT concerned about the "common good", but are concerned with serving their wealthy benefactors. Finally, the truly sad part of all of this is that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" has, once again, been shown to be an unshakable truth.

It is interesting that now that the lack of foresight on the part of Scott and Bush (and others before them) leads Governor Scott to begin the 'finger pointing"..with total disregard to the impact of his and his predecessors willingness to ignore Environmental Impact Statements in favor of political contributions and tax cuts for their benefactors.
25 · Share ›

Top Pundit → david · 2 days ago
Rick Scott and Jeb Bush will evade responsibility by blaming the EPA.
14 · Share ›

Mars S → Top Pundit · a day ago
They don't bear any responsibility for the disaster. As Gov, Scott has responsibility for the response. But heck- why bother considering facts when you can shoot your mouth off and blame the wrong person.
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wannacomment → david · 2 days ago
Well said! Plus,Scott disdains Obama and the feds but he seems ok with both now!
9 · Share ›

Michael Vevera → wannacomment · 2 days ago
He is a convicted fraud and a liar. I say the federal government tells him and the state to pound sand.
10 · Share ›

Mars S → Michael Vevera · a day ago
"convicted fraud"? Link?
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PhilZoda → Mars S · 14 hours ago
It's right under the links to Hillary's crimes.
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Mars S → PhilZoda · 13 hours ago
Of course you know that you sound silly trying to excuse the negligence of a sitting Secretary of State by comparing it to the actions of a health care giant that had nothing to do with national security.
Share ›

BerndM → Mars S · a day ago
Here's the Justice Department's take on Rick Scott's company. Link!
https://www.justice.gov/archiv...
Share ›

Mars S → BerndM · 18 hours ago
But but, companies aren't people and HCA is much bigger than Rick Scott. Heck, they've been buying up hospitals for a long time.
Share ›

Mars S → wannacomment · a day ago
So when you consider that the Army Corps of Engineers, a Federal agency, ordered the release of water that caused the algae bloom, what responsibility do you think the president has?
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Lindy Lindy → Mars S · 3 hours ago
The army corps has done so many wrong things and is now trying to change all the original things they did back the way they were before in Florida. They straightened all the rivers and streams and now have to make them crooked again.
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Mars S → david · a day ago
Except this was about lowering water levels in Lake Okeechobee, not Gov. Scott.
Share ›

Al F · 3 days ago
The Corps of Engineers combine with state inaction to generate a mess, and Federal assistance is needed from FEMA. Where have we heard THAT before?

This does not result from an act of nature that exceeds the state's capacity to respond (which, btw defines FEMA's role). This is a STATE-created disaster, from successive administrations who are proud of their budget cutting. So keep cutting budgets, and continue to defer maintenance of your infrastructure; just leave the Federal out of your problems.

The problem is that no elected conservative can advance to higher office without demonstrating adherence to the budget-cutting mantra. So budgets are sliced at all levels, leaving governments' roles unfulfilled. You can't cut everything at every level. SOMEBODY has to maintain basic infrastructure, public health and safety, education etc. Much of that is state and local responsibility.
22 · Share ›

Am Ca → Al F · 2 days ago
First Jeb Bush, then Rick Scott, have replaced the people in Florida's EPA who actually knew about environmental protection and how to deal with environmental crises - like breaks in gyp stack dams - with people whose expertise lies in knowing how to get building permits out quickly. So Florida really doesn't have anybody left who has any idea what to do when bad things happen. But they sure do know how to get permits out - and that's what the GOP considered "good customer service" on the part of a State EPA. It's not just Florida - this is happening in state environmental agencies all over the nation. The people who know about environmental protection are being replaced by people who don't have a clue by people who see these departments as just roadblocks to "progress."
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