

Officials: Red tide dissipating, water quality improving

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Communities across Southwest Florida suffering from the toxic choke-hold of red tide and blue-green algae blooms may be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

"We are very encouraged by recent water quality reports conducted by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission," the Lee County Visitor & Tourism web site stated Monday. "The most recent water samples show little to no red tide along our shorelines. There are also no beach advisories at this time..."



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Red tide

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According to the most recent red tide charts, provided by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the red tide toxin — *Karenia brevis* — is at “not present to background” levels along all Lee County shore lines.

“In Southwest Florida over the past week, *Karenia brevis* was observed in two of the 22 samples taken, in very low concentrations. One of the very low concentration samples was taken 11 miles west of Cayo Costa State Park (offshore), with the other low concentration sample taken at Bonta Beach Park (inshore). A very low concentration indicates 1,000 to 10,000 cells/L. *Karenia brevis* abundance,” FWC spokesperson Melody Kilborn said on Oct. 23.

Officials on Fort Myers Beach and Sanibel-Capriva have been praising improving beach conditions over the past few weeks, urging the public to come out and support the local businesses that have taken a severe economic hit.

As area waters start to move out of the red tide bloom, officials are staying on top of wind conditions, as they play a major role in carrying red tide in and off shore.

“Red tide blooms occur offshore and are carried inshore by winds and currents. Although the occurrence of a red tide cannot be predicted, scientists can forecast its movement using wind and water current data once a bloom is located,” Kilborn said. “Scientists also monitor the concentration of the red tide organism by collecting water samples routinely and in response to blooms. Red tide movement and concentration are important because the effects of a red tide, such as dead fish and human respiratory irritation, depend on these factors. The information provided by forecasting

and monitoring allows people to make informed decisions regarding their beach-going activities.”

The chances that it returns can only be predicted three days at a time, as the University of South Florida, along with the FWC, are using their system to forecast red tide.

“The USF-FWC Collaboration for the Prediction of Red tides uses FWC bloom data into an ocean modeling system to create three-day forecasts of ongoing *Karenia brevis* blooms,” Kilborn said. “Using this model we know that a net southeastern transport of surface waters and net southwestern movement of surface waters over the next three days is predicted. So there is some movement predicted, however, we are not able to tell if the conditions will get better or worse, outside of that three-day prediction window.”

So, is it safe to swim after such a large red tide event?

“The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is working diligently to collect water samples and monitor this bloom, as well as its effects on fish and wildlife,” Kilborn said. “For questions about human health, we would recommend reaching out to the Florida Department of Health.”

The Department of Health addresses the issue of red tide at floridadealth.gov. The specific link to the agency’s red tide Q&A is floridadealth.gov/environmental-health/aquatic-toxins/red-tide.html.

“While people swim in red tide, some individuals may experience skin irritation and burning eyes. If your skin is easily irritated, avoid red tide water. If you experience irritation, get out of the ocean and thoroughly wash off with fresh water,” the website states.

As for the blue-green algae, conditions have drastically improved in Cape Coral and its more than 400 miles of canals — most of which looked uninhabitable, riddled with thick mats of cyanobacteria and giving off a foul stench.

The Cape Coral Yacht Club reopened its beach for swimmers on Oct. 19 after the Department of Environmental Protection collected samples from the beach and pier, tested and the samples and found them free of cyanobacteria, said a city press release.

The Florida Department of Health also tested the water quality, finding it safe for swimming, according to officials.

Other sites throughout Lee County were tested over the last few weeks, with improvements across the board.

The FDEP Florida Algal Bloom Sample Collection website showed a site visit at Franklin Lock, with no algae visible.

The Alva Boat Ramp was also tested last week; results showing small specks of algae visible, but sampling did not test positive for Anatoxin-a or Cylindrospermopsis — two harmful bacteria produced from algal blooms.

Though these are all positive signs that Southwest Florida has made it through what has been called the worst bloom to date for the state, officials tout the unpredictable behavior of Mother Nature.

“Bloom conditions can change rapidly based on wind, rain and other variables,” Florida Department of Environmental Protection spokesperson Dee Ann Miller said. “Persistent blooms are routinely monitored and retested, and staff also regularly review satellite imagery and aerial photography, when available, to inform the development of daily sampling plans.

“The algal bloom response team takes all

algal blooms seriously and all federal, state and local agencies will continue to respond as quickly and efficiently as possible to both observed and reported algal blooms to ensure the health and safety of Floridians, visitors and our natural resources,” Miller added.

Officials remained clear that swimming or fishing where an algal bloom is visibly present or where warnings are posted should be avoided.

Heading into the dry season means fewer releases from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee, and those practices having been in the works for nearly three weeks.

“Drier conditions have meant we’ve been able to move water off the lake and make it possible to reduce flows to the estuaries,” Lt. Col. Jennifer Reynolds, Jacksonville District deputy commander for South Florida, said in an Oct. 4 press release. “That includes a zero flow target for the St. Lucie and a gradual transition down to 1,000 cubic feet per second for the Caloosahatchee over the next three weeks.”

It was the third week for a reduced flow schedule, with releases expected to continue at a minimum, according to officials.

“For optimal health of the Caloosahatchee Estuary, consistent dry season low-flows are necessary. Lee County will continue to work with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to ensure adequate flows are provided to the Caloosahatchee throughout the dry season,” a Lee County report on red tide and algae blooms said.

For more information, visit www.lee.gov/waterqualityinfo.

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