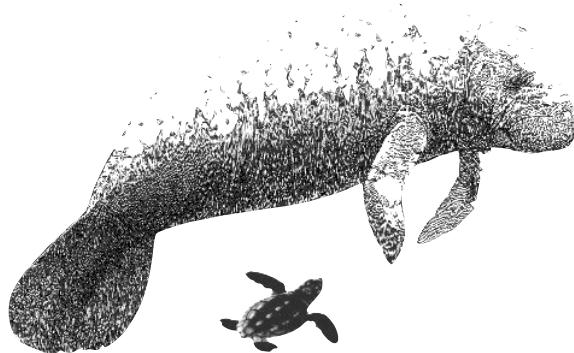


# ECOLOGICAL DISASTER IN FLORIDA

**Red tide season usually lasts from October to around February, but the current red tide has stayed along the Gulf coast for the last year and now appears to be spreading to the Atlantic coast, killing massive amounts of fish as well as sea turtles, manatees and a whale shark swimming in the area, closing beaches, and now posing a human health risk from airborne toxins.**



Hundreds of residents from across the state came to Fort Myers 10/3 to hear environmental activist Erin Brockovich give her thoughts and answer questions on the water quality issues that have plagued the Sunshine State all year.

Brockovich traveled from Satellite beach, to Lake Okeechobee and then toured the Caloosahatchee to better understand why these red tide and algal blooms have wreaked havoc on Florida's ecosystem-as well as economy.

**"I'm here for you. I'm here for the environment. And I'm here to protect water at every level- water is life."**

She was joined by a panel of local water quality experts-John Cassani from Calusa Waterkeeper, Captain Daniel Andrews from Captains for Clean Water and Natural Resource Policy Director for The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation, Rae Ann Wessel.

Brockovich's associate, water expert, Bob Bowcock, took the audience through what the pair saw during their time visiting numerous affected areas.

"It starts from the local, to regional, to state and up to the federal level," he said of why these issues have come about. "Everyone is contributing (to the problem), some more than others."

The issue, said Bowcock, starts north of Lake Okeechobee, at the Kissimmee River, and that water now moves down from the Kissimmee, to Lake O, to the Caloosahatchee, in nearly a day's time - where as before government entities messed with the natural flow- water took months to move through each system, allowing for natural cleansing. The water is picking up nutrients along its way through these rivers, lakes and watersheds from agriculture, sewer and septic lines, he said. Add runoff from housing and places like golf courses at the local level, and it exacerbates the issue.

Brockovich urged those in attendance to call their local policy makers, call their local health departments, show up at local council meetings - and don't stop until your voice is heard. "Speak up!" she told the crowd. "Be a disrupter. Some people think that's a bad thing, but it's not. It wakes people up. Make those phone calls.

"What I don't want you to do is to sit here and wait for them to come and tell you. I want you to start sending them the message. They need to hear from you. If you are having health problems, call the health department. Call them again, not one of you, not 10 of you, not 20 of you, but 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 of you. I don't care if they get stressed out. I don't care if their phone is ringing off the hook. Call them, call them, call them, call them, call them, until they respond. They want to make their job to ignore you, make it your job that they hear you."

Brockovich, along with the panel, took as many questions from the crowd as they could following their words to the public. A long line formed behind the podium, with many wanting to voice their opinion, outrage, health concerns and discouragement in state and local leaders.

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## Erin Brockovich:

**"The most concerning issue for clean water in the United States today is not chemical, physical or financial, it's politics. This is not the time to stand down; this is the time to fight. It's time to inform, educate and inspire action across America so that our communities and leaders are armed with the strongest weapon in politics: facts, answers, truth, and solutions.**

From the Flint, Michigan's Drinking Water Crisis to the toxic Waste Discharges from Lake Okeechobee in Florida, the root cause is always a politically driven process. Had the greater community and/or the consumers been actively involved and armed with the knowledge of the alternatives and the consequence of those alternatives, and been allowed the real opportunity to participate in the process, the results would likely be very different. More often than not, the decisions made are made by those that have the most to gain, or the most to lose. The community that will ultimately be dumped on, or the consumers that are ultimately forced to drink water of poor or dangerous quality, are often not part of the process, cut out by powerful corporations and big lobby dollars.

Today, a regional disaster is unfolding before our eyes in the State of Florida. The Governor declared a State of Emergency months ago which will likely last through the end of the year. Death and destruction of the ecosystem resulting in gory photo-ops, which are a daily occurrence... yet there has been little to no media attention given. Facts are being twisted, and a well-coordinated misinformation campaign has been launched. While the discharges from Lake Okeechobee have presented serious ecological and environmental problems for decades; and yes, there have been problems with flooding of the downstream watershed for centuries, local, state and federal politicians, and the corporations that control them, have been holding back on decades-old promises of solutions that, had they been implemented, would have prevented what has now become an ecological, public health and economic catastrophe.

The Lake Okeechobee disaster is a man-made disaster with significant environmental consequences for the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic Ocean, hundreds of miles of coastline, the Florida Everglades, scores of intercoastal waterways and marshlands... but how did we get here? This is a complicated problem that didn't happen overnight. Most of us do not understand the Florida Everglades is a massive complex watershed that begins far north of Lake Okeechobee in the Kissimmee River Basin. This great watershed once traveled the Kissimmee River through creeks and tributaries to the lake, which then passed into the Florida Bay. Underlying the river of complex grasses is porous limestone that captures massive amounts of fresh water supplying scores of lakes, springs and marsh systems. The Kissimmee River was a very important component of the Florida Everglades until it was cut off by the Army Corps of Engineers in a misguided attempt to manage Florida's fresh water for agriculture, industrial and residential development. Over 100 miles of winding river and tributaries that flowed gradually down the spine of the state to Lake Okeechobee was converted into a massive manually controlled canal, a 56-mile channel directly to Lake Okeechobee, a massive sewer of wastewater discharges that would have otherwise been cleaned of most nutrients in the natural grasses of the meandering river.

In 1903, floods destroyed most of the crops and farms in the Florida Everglades watershed and then Governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, who had won his election on the promise to "drain that abominable, pestilence-ridden swamp." Through the late 1920's, a series of hurricanes and resulting floods shifted the focus from agricultural fields drainage to flood control, two vastly diverging tactics. In the 1930s, the Army Corps of Engineers was brought in to construct a continuous ridge of levees around Lake Okeechobee, together with four massive canals connecting Lake Okeechobee to the Atlantic Ocean. This is when agriculture really took over, with the ability to rebuild, they gained permanent control of the region and have refused to let go. Sugar was and still is the predominant crop in the Florida Everglades, more than doubling the production within the first decade after the Army Corps of Engineers demonstrated they could maintain control of the flood waters, much to the pleasure of federal representatives obliged to their financial benefactors.

In the late 1940's, there were a series of hurricanes and record rainfall where hundreds of thousands of acres in both agricultural and urban areas were drenched in 108 inches of rainfall in just six months. Post World War II construction began on a series of dikes, dams, and canals with the ability to control the flow of one billion gallons of water a day. This resulted in South Florida

experiencing a post-war explosion in population, which continues to this day. The impacts: the Kissimmee River and its important nutrient cleaning grasses were devastated by drought, the Florida Bay is no longer brackish as intended by nature with the intrusion of saltwater which has forever changed its unique biodiversity. South Florida was never meant to be farmed or inhabited; man has irrevocably destroyed this unique tropical wetland and its ecosystem.

Today, we stand witness to the consequences of man trying to control the power of mother nature and have destroyed her. The managed runoff from industrial and residential developments and dairy farms north of Lake Okeechobee, void the natural wetlands that filter nutrient and other pollutants, combined with the reversal of flows from nutrient-rich farmland in the Florida Everglades to the south have turned Lake Okeechobee into a virtual cesspool of pollution. Nutrients and minerals have accumulated on in Lake Okeechobee, which have caused seasonal toxic blue-green algae blooms, beginning in the 1960's, monitored and managed throughout the 1970's and exploding in 1983, when the toxic algae covered its entire surface.

All of this is the result of apathetic failure by our government and government agencies. Officials charged with managing the regulatory controls on industrial and residential wastewater discharges as well as the amount of nutrients agricultural interests may discharge into our waterways and ultimately Lake Okeechobee. While watching in horror as our waterways, estuaries, and ecosystems are destroyed by the toxic releases from Lake Okeechobee, it's easy to place all of the blame with Big Sugar, the Army Corps of Engineers, unrelenting residential and commercial expansion but that gets us nowhere fast.

To date, the national media has picked up on the deadly red tides, fish kills, manatee and other mammals deaths, but that effort is barely picking up on the end of the story. This is a story about a disaster 100 year in the making with political, economic, and cultural influences; all stakeholders jockeying for positions of self-interest and influence. The result – nothing has a chance of ever getting done. Year after year, the problem will continue to expand with deadlier consequences. Florida is dying... and we are standing by watching. Yes, it is very complicated but we, all of us in the United States, must take notice, must become educated, and must become engaged. We cannot wait around any longer while our government continues to pander to this special interest group or that. This is not a partisan issue... regardless of party, it seems whoever is elected with ties to this problem quickly succumb to campaign contributions with strings attached.

Perhaps this is why Big Sugar so readily takes the well-deserved blow to the chin... it is they that benefit the most and spend the most influencing our elected officials. Perhaps the best example of how deeply rooted this is comes from Miami, Florida's own congressional district. Miami's current representative doesn't want you to know that they are such a big part of the problem; they are often quoted with the canned statement that any criticism of their environmental record is "laughable." They want you to believe that only Republicans like the current Florida Governor are really to blame for the toxic algae blooms. The truth is, the Miami Democrat has taken over \$150,000 from Big Sugar over past election years, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The Miami representative has voted, on multiple occasions, for hefty federal subsidies to the sugar and agricultural industries. The subsidies — more than \$100 million a year to the two largest sugar companies — are some of the worst forms of corporate handouts in America today. Further, as chair of the Democratic National Committee, the Miami representative overturned President Obama's 2008 ban on corporate lobby donations to the DNC, opening the door wider to enhancing Big Sugar's political clout. Likewise, Florida's Republican Governor, and so many other Florida politicians, Republicans and Democrats alike, are all equally responsible for aiding and abetting this ongoing tragedy.

Why am I involved? What can I add? What purpose do I serve? I believe it is my role, my duty, to shine a spotlight on this situation regionally, nationally, internationally. To educate, inform and empower others with truth. Facts are our only weapon against the culture of compromised elected representatives and self-serving bureaucrats. I hope we are not too late. For myself, nothing would be a greater reward, then for us as a nation to come together, to solve this ecological disaster in Florida, to fix the Drinking Water in Flint, to make real changes to the policies and regulations that were designed to protect us but have been twisted for political interests to be barriers to entry for new environmentally conscious businesses in favor of corrupt super-corporations, hell-bent on saving a dime while causing dollars in damage."

**"We can do this... together."**