

Turning the Toxic Tide: Florida is at historic crossroads; its leaders must act decisively

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Aerial view of toxic algae bloom flowing in a canal Friday, July 14, 2018 in Cape Coral, Florida.

Turning the Toxic Tide is a series of editorials published collectively by the six editorial boards of USA TODAY Network-Florida, with the goal of providing an environmental road map for the state's next governor, legislators and congressional delegation. This is the first in the series.

As they have for decades, the real estate brochures and tourism campaigns continue to tout Florida as a sun-kissed Shangri-la, blessed with clear blue waters and pristine beaches that look like paradise.

TURNING the TOXIC TIDE

Those of us who live here know paradise is in trouble.

Even as North Florida struggles to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Michael, a more persistent, insidious problem has been brewing for decades.

Florida has become the land of sunshine and environmental crisis. Gorgeous vistas are fouled by the smell of blue-green algae, sandy beaches defiled by dead fish washed ashore, casualties of red tide.

The crisis extends well beyond our coastlines. Aging sewage systems and septic tanks threaten vulnerable inland waters; nutrients from treated sewage, or biosolids, spread on agricultural lands find their way into nearby lakes and tributaries and befoul them.

Florida's iconic springs are threatened by a decline in flow volume and an increase in pollution. The Everglades, starved of fresh water and imperiled by rising sea levels, remains at risk. The threat of offshore drilling continues to loom.

It is not hyperbole to say that **Florida stands at an historic environmental crossroads** — one which could have profound economic consequences as “business-friendly” policies adapted in the wake of the Great Recession have become a liability, impacting key industries such as tourism and real estate.



In Ocala, a small portion of the Silver Springs, one of the original tourist attractions in Florida, can be seen reflecting light from below the surface of the Silver River. March 23, 2017. XAVIER MASCAREÑAS / TCPALM

Ultimately, Florida's desirability as a place to live, work or play will be diminished, possibly destroyed.

We cannot allow these crises to persist.

We must turn the toxic tide.

Over the next few months the **USA TODAY Network-Florida** will publish a series of editorials detailing our myriad environmental problems, and offering solutions to the incoming Florida governor — be it Democrat Andrew Gillum or Republican Ron DeSantis — detailing how the problems can be addressed.

Certainly, the governor alone is not responsible for addressing the crises. Florida's congressional delegation must keep pushing for solutions; the Legislature must prioritize these issues; and local communities must do more.

We have been heartened to see our water problems featured so prominently in this fall's political campaigns at both the state and federal level. However, once the election is over, these issues must remain atop the agenda.

We must return to the culture of responsible stewardship that predominated in years past. Over the past decade we have abandoned that legacy as leaders sought to boost economic growth at the expense of the environment. Regulatory agencies were dismantled and defanged, “business-friendly” guidelines replaced the more measured, cautious policies that had previously been in place.

There may have been a legitimate economic rationale for this approach in the immediate wake of the 2008 financial crisis. But it is clear, now, that budget cuts and deregulation have contributed significantly to our ecological plight.

That course must be reversed.

No longer can we prioritize economic growth over environmental preservation. Indeed, there must be a new understanding that, here in Florida, clean water is necessary for sustainable economic progress.

Key state agencies must be revitalized and depoliticized. Funding must be boosted, even if this means higher taxes. There must be more enforcement, more inspections, tougher standards.

Government, ultimately, must assume an activist role.

In a state where low taxes and small government remain cherished ideals, these suggestions may rankle. But what is the alternative?

Our environmental crises now approach the severity — and notoriety — of historic disasters such as the Love Canal toxic waste site or the Cuyahoga River fire.

The red tide is our Times Beach, Missouri; blue-green algae is our Flint, Michigan.

In the past, government — facing these historic challenges — moved decisively.

The Love Canal disaster, for example, helped bring about federal “Superfund” legislation; the Cuyahoga River fire motivated federal lawmakers to pass the National Environmental Policy Act and create the EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency.

<https://www.news-press.com/picture-gallery/news/local/2018/08/20/photos-most-devastating-images-floridas-ongoing-algae-crisis/1043745002/>



Florida Sportsman canal in Stuart on July 25, 2018. LEAH VOSS/TCPALM

Florida's government must respond to our crises with a similar sense of urgency.

Our problems are many, our time short. We risk leaving our children a legacy of degradation and destruction. The Florida we have known may be one they never get to experience.

We must turn the toxic tide, lest the toxic tide turn Florida into a paradise lost.

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This editorial reflects the opinion of the editorial boards of all six USA TODAY Network-Florida news organizations: FLORIDA TODAY, Naples Daily News, The News-Press, Pensacola News Journal, Tallahassee Democrat and TCPalm/Treasure Coast Newspapers.