

## Water quality in Sarasota County

**One of the most significant challenges that Floridians face today is preserving the quality of their local waters, and everyone has a part to play.**

In Sarasota County, water quality concerns have evolved from reducing pathogens to reducing nutrient pollution. While water quality and seagrass health were improving for many years, recent reports of increased algae and changes to seagrass abundance suggest these critical ecosystems may be in danger. Over the past 20 years, nitrogen - a nutrient that fuels algal growth - has doubled in Sarasota Bay. These reports have elevated concerns and it is clear we must do more to protect our bays and beaches.

There are multiple sources of nutrients flowing downstream into our bays. Research shows that these sources include septic systems, stormwater, reclaimed water, fertilizer, air pollution, wastewater discharges as well as decaying plant material such as grass clippings, pet waste and soil erosion. Reducing nutrient pollution is our best strategy for improving seagrass health and achieving cleaner water overall, which is a benefit to our economy, way of life and environment.

### What you can do to protect water quality

**No matter where we live or work, stormwater from our homes and businesses eventually flows to our bays. Everyone can make a difference in protecting water quality.**

- Limit the use of fertilizer. Follow Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles. Don't fertilize unless necessary and be sure to skip nitrogen and phosphorus-based fertilizers from June 1-Sept. 30.
- Ensure your personal or homeowner association's irrigation practices limit water use to the amount appropriate for your landscape, no more than once per week. Consider installing a rain barrel system.
- If you irrigate with reclaimed water, factor in the nutrients already in the water before applying fertilizer to your landscape. For help, visit [bit.ly/bayfriendlyfertilizing\\_home](http://bit.ly/bayfriendlyfertilizing_home).
- Pick up and properly discard pet waste in the garbage.
- Maintain your septic system and implement advanced treatment. If possible, hook up to the central sewer.
- Decrease soil erosion in your yard by maintaining healthy groundcover, rocks or mulch.
- Keep grass clippings, oak leaves, acorns and other yard debris out of drains and waterbodies.
- Increase pervious surface and let the water soak in wherever possible to reduce your runoff footprint. Pervious paver driveways can reduce stormwater pollution.

- Drive the most fuel-efficient vehicle possible to reduce nitrogen deposition or use public transportation, walk, bike or carpool whenever possible.
- Buy local produce from farms that apply Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services' Best Management Practices.
- Protect natural shorelines and wetland areas.
- Create, maintain and enhance natural shoreline buffers, living shorelines and littoral zones around stormwater ponds and along waterways.

### What the county is doing to protect water quality

**Sarasota County has a long history of leadership in water quality initiatives addressing the various sources of pollution including, but not limited to:**

- Investing in large-scale projects like Dona Bay and Celery Fields to reduce flood risk and stormwater pollution while supporting the long-term drinking water supply and balancing the flow of freshwater into the ecosystem.
- Working toward significantly reducing nutrients in treated wastewater by moving to Advanced Wastewater Treatment at the Bee Ridge Water Reclamation Facility by 2025.
- Regulating wastewater treatment plant performance countywide through delegation from the state.

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- Transitioning more than 10,000 septic systems to central sewer in the Phillippi Creek Septic Replacement Program to improve treatment.
- Exploring opportunities to expand the septic system replacement program countywide.
- Implementing policies on fertilizer and landscape management that establish a restricted season for nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers, requirements for slow-release nitrogen fertilizers the rest of the year, a fertilizer-free zone along waterbodies, mandatory training for commercial fertilizer applicators and prohibition of vegetative debris in stormwater systems.
- Implementing stormwater and environmental policies in proposed land-use changes and development. The policies cover issues related to water conservation, stormwater treatment, erosion, sediment runoff and protection of shorelines and native habitats including wetlands.
- Implementing sustainable transportation programs that reduce emissions from motor vehicles, which helps reduce atmospheric deposition of nitrogen.
- Leading by example in county operations through low-impact development (LID) in road projects, sustainable landscaping and integrated pest management practices

at county facilities and parks, best practices in maintenance of stormwater infrastructure, and regular street sweeping.

- Providing education to residents, professionals and homeowner associations related to nutrient management, water pollution and conservation. In 2019, more than 600 people participated in a Water Quality Summit to learn about current initiatives and future opportunities for action to protect our valuable watersheds.
- Supporting the implementation of stormwater and sustainable landscaping projects in neighborhoods across the county through the Neighborhood Initiative Grant Program and Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team Program.
- Conducting comprehensive, long-term water quality monitoring of bays and creeks with the data available on the Sarasota Water Atlas website.
- Partnering with national, regional and local organizations like the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program, Southwest Florida Water Management District and Florida Department of Environmental Protection to improve water quality.
- Advocating for state and federal policies and funding that support local and regional water quality.

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