

WATER QUALITY 2025 SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT



Overview

Sarasota County Government remains committed to protecting and enhancing our region’s water quality today and for future generations. The health of our waterways is monitored through a variety of indicators, including total nitrogen, chlorophyll-a levels and the presence of biological markers like seagrass and scallops.

Excess nitrogen continues to be the leading pollutant impacting local water quality, often entering our systems from septic tanks, fertilizers, wastewater discharges and stormwater runoff. But through strategic action, science-based planning and everyday community choices, we all play a role in reducing nutrient pollution.

This mid-year report spotlights key projects, initiatives and partnerships from January through June 2025, that demonstrate Sarasota County’s ongoing investment in clean water. Many of these efforts reflect strong collaboration across departments, partner agencies, and residents alike.

For ongoing updates, visit scgov.net/waterquality.



Education and Outreach

Sarasota County has continued its commitment to community education and engagement as a cornerstone of protecting local water quality.

UF/IFAS Extension and Sustainability (Extension) hosted 156 classes and events on topics ranging from water conservation and ecology to waste reduction and Florida-Friendly Landscaping™, reaching nearly 4,000 residents. The “ex•plore” series offered immersive experiences like nature hikes, gardening demonstrations and tours of county facilities. The department also produced 101 educational videos, reaching more than 69,000 views, and shared 515 social media posts that garnered over 400,000 impressions.

Through in-classroom and field learning experiences, the LIFE (Learning in Florida’s Environment) program educated nearly 700 students from six different schools about coastal ecosystems and water stewardship. Extension also partnered with local nonprofits to teach over 450 youth about composting and native wildlife.

Conservation-focused education efforts were also extended to the public through Extension’s “Path of the Panther” film screening and panel discussion, a collaboration with the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program



to educate Longboat Key residents on post-storm landscaping recovery, and through the creation of a Wildflower Meadow demonstration garden featuring pollinator-friendly native plants.

Throughout the year, education and awareness efforts continued across county departments. Public Works staff participated in more than a dozen public outreach events, engaging over 1,000 residents about stormwater management and encouraging environmental best practices such as creating rain gardens, limiting fertilizer use and

properly disposing of yard waste.

Sarasota County promoted these initiatives through traditional and digital media, including WWSB ABC7's "Suncoast View" and its own Water Quality Monthly Update videos, which included features on seagrass health and community-led storm drain marking projects in partnership with schools. The county's annual NEST (Neighborhood Environmental Stewardship Team) calendar contest, themed "Ready When It Rains," provided an opportunity for young artists to highlight environmental practices that support clean water and resilient landscapes. Educational outreach at events, such as the Alligator Creek Festival, helped inform the public about upcoming stream restoration efforts and broader watershed management strategies.



In the first six months of 2025, the Communications Department created six videos, totaling 15,411 views on Facebook.

- January Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=627437176534247>
 - Views: 1,140; Reach: 1,110
- February Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1ExUmsLKBW/>
 - Views: 1,987; Reach: 1,946
- March Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1S1oXoDSnh/>
 - Views: 2,444; Reach: 2,276



- April Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1GuiUaq7XJ/>
 - Views: 2,819; Reach: 2,678
- May Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1BoQZtbf1e/>
 - Views: 1,866; Reach: 1,877

- June Water Quality Update: <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/16uoH6bmyM/>
 - Views: 2,879; Reach: 2,696



Habitat Restoration

Sarasota County made substantial progress in restoring coastal and marine habitats to support cleaner water and healthier ecosystems. Parks, Recreation and Natural Resources (PRNR) led several initiatives, including the deployment of artificial reefs. Seven major deployments were completed during the first half of 2025, totaling over 66 tons of reef material at Tom Wallins and Silvertooth reefs. In December, four additional reef balls were placed at Tom Wallins, contributing another three tons of structure to support marine life.

Recent hurricanes have resulted in much construction and vegetative debris in local waterways. County and contractor teams have removed 45,657 cubic yards of debris from local waterways between August 1, 2024, and July 23, 2025. This number includes in-house staff work and contractor services. The Public Works department also removed 197 pounds of floatable debris from five watergoat litter-catching systems and partnered with Sarasota High School's Environmental Honor Society to reinstall a watergoat on Hudson Bayou. Preparations for hurricane season included updates to the Marine Strike Team's staffing, equipment, and vessels, and collaboration with Florida Department of Emergency Management (FDEM) contractors on marine debris cleanup assessments in north Sarasota County. These efforts reduce pollution and improve navigability and aquatic habitat health.



Public Works supported habitat enhancement with continued monitoring of key species and coastal conditions and debris removal. Staff completed six scallop surveys and semi-annual oyster assessments, as well as 40 winter seagrass surveys and macroalgae monitoring in collaboration with the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program.



Land Conservation

The Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) and Neighborhood Parkland Acquisition Program (NPP) played a critical role in safeguarding Sarasota County's natural resources.

In the first half of 2025, the county acquired three fee-simple properties totaling 11.4 acres. These acquisitions included land adjacent to Lemon Bay and Alligator Creek, a parcel along East Venice Avenue within the Myakka River Watershed and a property near the Celery Fields Regional Stormwater Facility and Sarasota Audubon Center.



In addition, the county secured a 14.5-acre conservation easement over the Elling Eide property on Little Sarasota Bay. These four protected parcels, totaling 25.9 acres, help reduce nutrient runoff, recharge groundwater, support floodplain functions and preserve vital wildlife habitats.



Stormwater

Sarasota County’s stormwater water quality initiatives focused on improving community awareness, supporting healthy pond management practices and promoting structural upgrades that reduce runoff pollution. Public Works visited 16 communities and engaged more than 70 residents with direct education on stormwater pond best management practices. Three neighborhoods were welcomed into the Healthy Pond Collaborative, which helps communities assess and enhance the condition of their ponds through vegetation restoration and shoreline stabilization.



A highlight of 2025 was the launch of the RainCheck Program, a small-scale incentive rebate initiative that encourages property owners to install rain gardens, rain barrels, pervious pavers and other stormwater-friendly infrastructure. Staff promoted RainCheck at environmental conferences and regional planning council meetings, and received more than 30 applications. Two rebate projects have been completed to date. In addition to technical assistance, the program serves as a public education tool on low-impact development and water conservation. Public Works also completed 15 flood

evaluations for residents and helped advance plans for major restoration projects such as Alligator Creek and the Dona Bay Phase 3 Aquifer Recharge.

Regulatory Compliance and Standards for Development

Sarasota County’s regulatory efforts are critical to long-term water quality protection, especially in development, wastewater and septic systems. Sarasota County Public Utilities led major infrastructure improvements, including the award-winning Bee Ridge Water Reclamation Facility Conversion and Expansion Project, which received the prestigious Gold Envision Award for sustainable infrastructure. Construction also began on the Venice Gardens Water Reclamation Facility’s advanced wastewater treatment conversion. Both projects will significantly reduce nutrient loads in reclaimed water.



As part of its ongoing system evaluation efforts, Utilities completed sanitary sewer evaluations and is nearing 95% restoration in the Bee Ridge Basin to prevent overflows. The county experienced only 21



sanitary sewer overflows in 2025, with just four due to blockages and none caused by Fats, Oils and Grease (FOG) accumulation, thanks to consistent oversight of 880 food establishments and residential education programs.

To further protect surface water quality, Sarasota County Solid Waste is implementing multiple projects to reduce the impact of leachate, the liquid that drains from landfills, on the wastewater treatment system. Construction of a new Leachate Tank Aeration System began in November 2024 and is expected to be completed in winter 2025. This system will improve the quality of leachate before it enters the treatment process. In parallel, work began in late 2024 on leachate storage ponds, designed to support future treatment systems, with completion anticipated in fall 2025. In May 2024, the Board of County Commissioners approved the design and permitting of a new reverse osmosis treatment system, expected to be operational in 2025. This advanced system will be capable of removing up to 80 percent of ammonia from landfill leachate, significantly improving downstream water quality.

The Florida Department of Health (DOH) in Sarasota County also contributed to environmental protection through extensive water testing and permitting. In 2025, DOH staff analyzed 601 drinking water samples for microbiological contamination and tested beach water quality with 370 bacteriological samples and 360 red tide assessments. They conducted 12 tests for PFAS/PFOS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances and perfluorooctane sulfonate) and 5 for VOCs (Volatile organic compounds) in drinking wells, with contaminated sites referred to the Department of Environmental Protection for remediation. DOH issued 151 new domestic well permits and 183 for irrigation, while 184 abandoned or unused wells were properly sealed to reduce groundwater contamination risks. The department also processed 1,148 septic permits, with requirements for enhanced treatment standards that reduce nutrient discharges to surface and groundwater.



Planning and Development Services contributed to pollution reduction and site cleanup, evaluating 73 pollution reports, conducting 10 industrial stormwater inspections, and overseeing cleanup at eight contaminated sites. The sale of 58 rain barrels further promoted residential stormwater retention and conservation practices.