

Q&A



Bring Back Our Blue Lagoon

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- **Is there still a permit or law in place that allows sewage to be released into our waterways during a hurricane or tropical storm?**
 - The only thing permitted to be released prior to a storm is wastewater that has been treated. It is the same as the water sent through the reclaimed water lines. This is done to prepare for the influx of stormwater expected to enter the system during storms, so that the plants don't overflow with raw sewage. Since Hurricane Irma, improvements to the wastewater treatment plants and repairs to leaking lines have decreased the need for these permitted releases.
- **Is the county addressing other pollutants besides nitrogen and phosphorus such as stormwater runoff, green development to reduce stress, density limits as more density can create more pollution?**
 - Stormwater runoff is one of the areas the Save Our Indian River Lagoon (SOIRL) Plan is addressing to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus pollution. The stormwater improvements may also remove other pollutants. Low impact development is also available for funding through SOIRL. Density limits and other development regulations are something the Board of County Commissioners would need to address as it is not in the purview of SOIRL.
 - As we look forward to 2024, we are encouraged by the improved water quality and clarity over the past 18 months and the beginning of seagrass recovery in many locations. These signs of ecosystem resilience and recovery give us hope for the future. However, this past summer's algal blooms, unusually high water temperatures, periods of low dissolved oxygen and fish mortality events (thankfully small & isolated) provide constant reminders that the Lagoon remains highly vulnerable.
- **It seems like the Lagoon is improving or is this just my imagination?**
 - We have seen fewer and smaller algae blooms the last few years. This year we have had reports of seagrass returning to many areas. So, we are starting to see improvements but we still have a long way to go and need to continue reducing excess nutrient pollution to the lagoon.
- **How big of a threat are septic tanks to the nitrogen and phosphorus balance in the Indian River Lagoon, and what solutions can help in mitigating the challenges associated with septic tanks?**
 - Septic tanks contribute about 19% of the nitrogen pollution in the lagoon. The amount of phosphorus pollution from septic tanks has not been measured as phosphorus becomes bound in soils so is more difficult to measure how much is making it to the lagoon from septic systems. The solutions are either removal and connection to sewer or septic upgrades to either an advanced treatment unit (ATU) system or enhancing drain fields with in-ground nitrogen reducing biofilters (INRB) or other technology to increase nitrogen removal. The state recently passed a rule that all new septic in the BMAP areas like the lagoon must be advanced systems and all existing traditional septic systems will need to upgrade by 2030.

- **Of the five counties bordering the Indian River Lagoon, Brevard County is the only one funding the clean-up efforts through the 1/2 cent sales tax. What can be done to bring the other counties financially into the clean-up effort?**
 - The SOIRL ½ cent sales tax is only one funding source that is making improvements in Brevard. Other municipalities are funding improvements through various other sources as well. Likewise, other counties are also making efforts to clean up the lagoon but are addressing funding it in different ways. IRLNEP would likely have a better overview of what other counties are doing.
 - It is true that only Brevard County has the ½ cent sales tax surcharge. Counties can add surcharges to sales tax, but not all do (DR 15DSS R. 11-22.pdf (floridarevenue.com)). With 71% of the Lagoon shoreline, Brevard County is definitely a positive leader with its SOIRL program! Please know that all 5 counties and the 38 municipalities are contributing financially. The City of Vero Beach recently initiated a stormwater utility tax. Brevard County also has a stormwater utility tax. Neighboring communities of Fort Pierce, Fellsmere and Sebastian already had stormwater utilities (over 170 municipalities in Florida already have stormwater utility tax). We expect the demand for stormwater utilities to continue"

In general, Lagoon projects and the good news don't get enough media attention. There is likely more going on to help the Lagoon than you might think. When we asked our federal, state and local partners what IRL-focused projects they were working on, outside of any joint projects with the IRLNEP, we received information on 301 projects that were either completed or in progress during fiscal year 2023. This brings the total number of reported projects to 870 in the 5 counties over the past three years. We expect with record level funding available, there will likely be even more projects in FY 2024.