

## Opinion

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### Dead marine life is the consequence of lax regulation

**T**he sea turtles now washing up on Florida's southwest shores are a sad reminder of the assault that's been going on for years against the Gulf of Mexico, courtesy of polluters and lax regulators in Tallahassee and Washington.

The scientific warnings about the Gulf's ill health are coming true. This year's spectacle is dead turtles, more than 77 of them off the southwest coast since July. But it isn't just turtles: About 58 dead manatees have also been hauled in since March, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says they died from red tide, just like the turtles. Last year's national TV news showed dead dolphins, washing up all over the Panhandle in March while tourists walked gingerly by, holding their noses.

Fishermen and divers say that there is a 2,000-square-mile Gulf "dead zone" stretching from Pasco County to Sarasota. The dead zone - the worst most can remember - is littered with dead fish, crabs, corals and shellfish.

The red tide that is killing these sea creatures is fed by extra nutrients that wash into the water from polluted rivers, factory-sized dairies, industrial pipes, poorly planned development and outdated sewage treatment plants. This pollution is tipping the biological apple cart we all depend on for fishing, swimming and drinking.

Florida's Department of Environmental Protection isn't helping matters. In office buildings far from the beaches where dead sea creatures are washing in, Gov. Jeb Bush's bureaucrats are making changes on paper that reverberate to our coastline.

The trouble started in 1999 and continues through today. The DEP decided to remove hundreds of waterways from the state's official cleanup list. The state worked closely with polluting industries to craft the list, which included such notoriously polluted waterways as Taylor County's black and smelly Fenholloway, the only Florida river ever officially set aside as an "industrial" waterway. The DEP had no business taking the Fenholloway off the cleanup list! DEP also wiped many waterways off the list that are clearly in need of help, including parts of Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades, Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor, Pensacola Bay, the Suwannee and St. Johns rivers, as well as polluted waters off the crowded southeastern coast.

Even though Florida's actions violated one of America's premier environmental laws - the federal Clean Water Act - the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency refused to step in and correct Florida's mistakes. It took a lawsuit filed by the Clean Water Network, Sierra Club and others to finally get EPA's attention.

Now, in a victory for the public, the EPA is admitting for the first time in court documents that Florida illegally changed its water quality standards and violated the Clean Water Act.

Incredibly, Florida's DEP has released a new list of polluted waters to come off the state cleanup plan - an action that defies the Clean Water Act, a federal court order, and now the EPA's own findings. The newest list has 151 waters that are to be deleted. That brings the statewide total to 487 polluted waters that DEP refuses to recognize as needing better protection.

It's a sad fact that more than 30 years after the Clean Water Act promised clean water, an overwhelming majority of Americans live within 10 miles of a polluted river, lake or coastal water.

All this legal maneuvering over Florida's cleanup list is dry stuff carried out in sterile courtrooms, but it has a

dramatic impact on the waters we use for fishing, drinking and swimming. It also affects our property values and Florida's economy. Bureaucrats in Tallahassee shouldn't be allowed to erase waterways off a paper list, leaving real pollution to kill turtles, dolphins, fish and manatees - as well as making swimmers sick. Even the bureaucrats in Washington are beginning to admit it.

How many more dead turtles, manatees, dolphins and fish will it take before Florida cracks down on polluters?

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Commentary