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Environmental agency letting polluters set the rules

At a time when our rivers, bays and oceans are under ecological stress from too many oxygen-robbing nutrients in the water, Florida Department of Environmental Protection officials are going around the state weakening the rules on pollution. Look out: They may be coming to "protect" a river near you next.

It's gotten so bad that scientists are having to remind DEP that fish can't survive in low oxygen. But DEP is working alongside polluters, proposing lower standards for dissolved oxygen in three places where waters are already polluted: the Hillsborough River, St. John's River, and the state's dirtiest, the Fenholloway in Taylor County.

"In legal terms, you set a precedent," biologist Ed Matheson of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute told the Tampa Tribune. "Everybody will say 'They did it there, let's do it over here.' "

The state's public hearings are filled with polluters' lawyers. The polluters and DEP are often joined together on one side of a lawsuit, while citizens are on the other, fighting for cleaner waterways. What's wrong with this picture?

Last summer, a smelly algae bloom turned the St. John's River into what the Florida Times-Union called "a regional eyesore." Incredibly, DEP set low water quality standards for the St. John's, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved them. Citizens had to step in and file suit to make EPA take a closer look. Guess what? EPA found DEP's pollution limits inadequate under the Clean Water Act, which is what the citizens were saying all along.

Lower oxygen standards for the Fenholloway - the only Florida river ever set aside as an industrial waterway - are a cruel joke. Again, citizens are having to raise money and file suit to get somebody to enforce pollution laws. DEP officials are writing letters to newspapers bragging about how they are protecting jobs at the aging, polluting pulp mill in Perry. Wait a minute - if DEP's job now is to watch out for industrial employers, then who's watching out for the environment? What about the huge dead zone where the Fenholloway meets the Gulf?

DEP recently proposed lowering oxygen standards for the Hillsborough River, at the behest of the Tampa Bay Water utility. Tampa Bay Water wants to pull 13 million more gallons of water out of the river each day, and make up the lost river flow with treated sewer plant wastewater. The wastewater has oxygen-robbing nutrients in it. The Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, and the Tampa Bay Estuary program are protesting.

DEP should be leading the charge to stop polluters. Instead, they are trying to give industry yet another break. How much more do they think our waters can stand?

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