

Key residents target red tide

New committee takes an active role in fighting nasty algae

By **STEVE REILLY**
STAFF WRITER

ENGLEWOOD — The South Manasota/Sandpiper Key Association isn't sitting on the sidelines when it comes to the toxic red tide algae.

Association president Damian Ochab praised Charlotte County for scheduling its Jan. 29 Water Quality Summit meeting, where state and other expert panels will discuss what can be done to address the toxic algae that plagued the Gulf coastline from Pinellas County south to Collier.

Association members also praised newly elected Gov. Ron DeSantis for immediately wanting the state to address toxic algae and other environmental challenges.

But the association — which represents 500 households south of the Sarasota-Charlotte county line on Manasota Key — isn't simply depending upon county and state officials for help.

The association formed its own committee to address red tide.

"Primarily, because of what happened since November 2017," Ochab said, referring to a bloom Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission first started tracking the growth of blooms in the Gulf and plagued Southwest Florida all summer and into the fall.

The algae itself is natural to the Gulf, but becomes a problem as the blooms grow.

Carried by winds and currents inshore, the blooms spread and intensified this summer to levels of a million or more

cells per liter. The surf was stained a reddish brown with the algae. The intense blooms killed marine life — fish, sea turtles, manatees and other marine mammals — that washed up on beaches daily and polluted the air with a toxic stench carried on winds causing respiratory and other ailments in humans.

While it's been away from Manasota Key for the most part, the red tide remains. The FWC posted on myfwc.com Friday the most recent results of water testing. Sarasota County still sees medium to high counts of red tide along its shoreline. Water samples taken Monday and Wednesday suggest the red tide bloom is intensifying and spreading south to Venice, Manasota Key and Gasparilla Island.

Sarasota, Charlotte and Collier counties are the only three counties where red tide continues to turn up in water samples, although over the summer and early fall, it spread as far north as the Panhandle and made a rare appearance on Florida's East Coast, where fish kills were reported.

Remaining attentive

"Good, bad or ugly, we want to know what is going on," Ochab said. The committee will update residents on what strides have been made and what new information is available at the association's monthly meetings.

The primary goals of the red tide committee are:

- To educate and communicate to its members the health and economic effects of red tide.
- To promote use of "Florida Friendly"

fertilizers in all landscaping applications, fertilizers low in phosphorus and nitrogen, and to prevent nutrients washing into canals, tributaries, Lemon Bay and the Gulf.

CHARLOTTE COUNTY WATER SUMMIT

Expert panel discussions addressing toxic red tide algae and other water quality issues are set for 1 to 5 p.m., Jan. 29 at the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center, 75 Taylor Road, Punta Gorda. Open to the public and free.

West County shuttles

Charlotte County Transit will provide shuttle bus service between Tringali Park, 3460 N. Access Road, Englewood and the Charlotte Harbor Event and Conference Center in Punta Gorda for the Water Quality Summit in Punta Gorda.

Shuttle buses will depart from the community center at Tringali Park at 12:15 p.m. and 12:30 p.m. Buses will return to Tringali Park following the summit.

For information, contact Brian Gleason at 941-743-1462 or email Brian.Gleason@CharlotteCountyFL.gov.

• To develop and create landscaping designs less dependent on fertilizers and more suited for Florida's soil, water and climate.

• To teach association members how to properly dispose of toxic, dead fish along the Manasota Key shoreline and not dig a hole and bury fish under the beach sand.

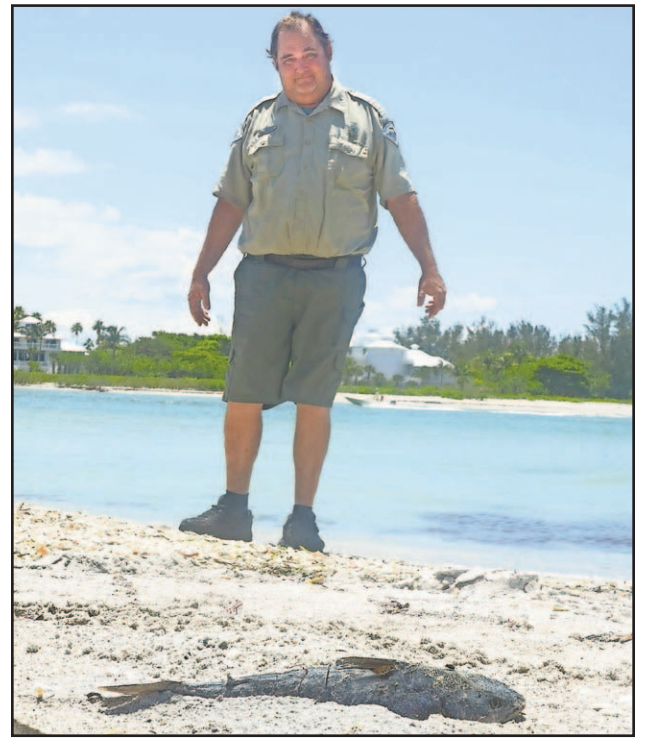
• To encourage neighboring Charlotte and Sarasota homeowners and their associations to privately inspect, clean, repair and/or replace existing septic systems.

The association supports the conversion from septic systems to sewage treatment systems whenever possible and feasible.

This past year, the persistence and intensity of the red tide bloom proved to be an eye opener for Manasota Key residents and the Englewood community at large.

"This is the worst one ever," said Kerrigan Clough, a member of the committee. He also served the Environmental Protection Agency when it was first created by President Nixon in 1970. He rose to be a deputy administrator overseeing EPA projects in Colorado and other western states.

"The population at risk, now, is huge, both from



SUN FILE PHOTO BY SANDY MACYS

Stump Pass Beach State Park ranger Ken Neider looks at a fish that washed on the beach after being killed by red tide in this June 9 file photo. Stump Pass Beach is at the south end of Manasota Key in Englewood.

the perspective of health and economics," Clough said. "Red tide is coming back and it is serious. We need to take action, as a community and a state, to reduce the problem."

The association hopes to encourage state health officials test for bacteria and health hazards at public beaches daily,

especially in the wake of red tide blooms and fish kills.

While red tide is natural to the Gulf, the association hopes its members to reduce their contribution of nitrogen and other nutrients that can help feed red tide and other algae blooms.

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