The toxic blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) extending from Lake Okeechobee to the coasts represents decades of failed water policy implementation. A perfect storm of lax enforcement and underfunding at the local, state and national levels has culminated in this harmful algae bloom (HAB) tsunami.

Calusa Waterkeeper (CWK) calls on political leaders to take the following actions:

• Post bilingual signs and erect temporary barriers warning the public of potential dangers at all public access points along the Caloosahatchee and other waterbodies with HABs. Resolve confusing jurisdiction as to which agency has this responsibility.
• Declare a State of Emergency.
• The US House of Representatives needs to pass legislation that supports the provisions of the bipartisan Senate Bill 1057, The Harmful Algal Blooms and Hypoxia Research and Control Amendments Act of 2017.
• Relaunch and fund the Florida HAB Task Force (TF) defunded in 2001 (but still enabled by Florida Statute 379.2271) with the objective of adopting a modern response strategy, similar to other states that utilize numeric thresholds, to guide state agency action on HABs.
• The Florida Environmental Regulation Commission should consider cyanotoxins as regulated contaminants in Florida with input from the re-instated Florida HAB TF.
• Revise Florida stormwater treatment regulations to increase non-point stormwater runoff treatment capacity as part of the criteria in the “Design Requirements for Stormwater Treatment Systems in Florida.” Greater nutrient sequestering capacity will address the increased frequency of extreme storm events and the nutrient pollution that results.
• The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) should revise the total maximum daily load (TMDL) Prioritization Criteria to increase the number of nutrient impaired water bodies selected for TMDL implementation in each five-year cycle. This will require Increased funding for implementation. Only 15 of FL’s 54 basins are selected for TMDL implementation during each five-year cycle. It may take up to 20 years for TMDL implementation to begin under the current criteria.
• Revise FDEP Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs) for nutrient impaired waterbodies with higher nutrient load reduction requirements reflecting current loading rates. As is, some BMAPs rely on nutrient load reductions determined from land use 14 years ago.
• Big sugar is not the problem per se, but it blocks the solution to the problem. The State must purchase an additional 52,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) for a storage reservoir and filter marshes. This will not solve the problem, but it is the single most important action that Florida can take. Amendment 1 provides the necessary funds.
• Implement ALL options in the University of Florida Water Institute’s technical review “Options to Reduce High Volume Freshwater Flows to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries and Move More Water from Lake Okeechobee to the Southern Everglades (March 2015).

The current HAB is of historic magnitude. We are at a tipping point. If political leaders fail to take action, history is doomed to repeat itself. The science is clear as to what has to be done, but does the political will exist?