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**CLEWISTON**  
Chamber of Commerce



A letter from the Executive Director

### **Weather Channel's Misinformation About Water Quality Could Jeopardize Our Tourism Economy**

A recent documentary from the Weather Channel relives the algae crisis that plagued Treasure Coast beaches for several weeks this summer. Without using any science or water quality data, this so-called documentary uses scare tactics and attempts to blame hardworking men and

women in the South Florida farming industry as the source of the pollution. Perhaps most alarmingly, the documentary paints an inaccurate picture of Lake Okeechobee, which could leave the viewer reluctant about vacationing in Florida.

We share in the frustration that resulted from algae blooms on the Treasure Coast this past summer. We recognize that for fishing boat captains, the algae meant that a day on the inshore waters would be impossible. For restaurants and hotels, the national television coverage of the algae meant fewer customers in seats and in beds.

For the City of Clewiston, having a clean and healthy Lake Okeechobee is in our best interest. According to the U.S. Travel Association, travel to Clewiston related to recreation on Lake Okeechobee has a \$30 million impact locally. As [local fisherman Scott Martin recently said](#), Lake Okeechobee is not the “toxic cesspool” some in the media and in the activist community are purporting it to be. To suggest that it is when the science just doesn’t support it could put our local economy at risk.

The truth is that the algae blooms are long gone, but the water quality challenges facing Florida’s waterways remain.

We appreciate the work of the Florida Chamber, which is partnering with scientists to get to the source of Florida’s water quality challenges. Here are some of the key takeaways the Florida Chamber has found through its partnership with scientists at Florida Atlantic University’s Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute:

An analysis by Florida Today found septic tanks contribute an estimated 2 million pounds of nitrogen in the lagoon per year.

Nitrogen promotes the growth of algae, which suffocates seagrass needed to sustain lagoon life.

Thousands of the septic tanks near the lagoon are located at homes built before 1983, the cutoff when state law increased septic tank setbacks from the water and the distance between drain fields and the water table.

Maany of the septic tanks are old and malfunctioning. State health officials estimate up to 10 percent of Florida’s 2.6 million septic tanks are failing.

Harbor Branch marine biologist Dr. Brian LaPointe describes sewage nitrogen as “the smoking gun” threatening the lagoon.

Recognizing the negative impact that septic tanks are having on water quality, the Clewiston Chamber is proud to support [Governor Rick Scott’s initiative](#) to help clean up the Indian River Lagoon and Caloosahatchee Rivers. By committing additional funding toward helping local communities move from septic to sewer systems, the state can begin making meaningful progress on what science shows is the real problem contributing to water quality issues.

While attempting to solve Florida’s water quality issues, it’s important that we are using science and data as a guide so we aren’t sending mixed messages to those increasingly turning to the Sunshine State as their place to live, work, and visit. Despite our challenges, Florida welcomed a record [85 million visitors in 2016](#), despite the algae, hurricanes, and the threat of Zika.

Our region is a beautiful place to live and vacation, and we have to keep it that way. Working together, we can ensure Florida's natural beauty remains for generations to come.

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