

## John Moran: Will this be Florida's watershed moment?

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By John Moran Special to The Sun

And so it has come to this. What was once Florida's family secret is now in full view for all the world to see.

The word is out: We've been terrible stewards of our waters, and we have the international news headlines to show for it.

"Guacamole-thick algae" washes ashore on the beaches of the state the governor ironically promotes as "the world's top tourist destination." And a huge swath of Lake Okeechobee is covered in lurid green slime, visible from space.

Florida's water woes aren't a new story, of course. This is just an old tale reaching a wider audience. The details may differ, but our springs and rivers and lakes and coastal waters have been heading south for many years.

If a lie can destroy a reputation, so too can the truth. And the pictures don't lie. If a state could declare environmental bankruptcy, Florida today would be in Chapter 11.

The sliming of our waters is a growing public health threat, a deepening environmental crisis, a looming economic disaster and a public relations nightmare.

And we can't blame the Army Corps of Engineers, or the Environmental Protection Agency, or an act of God. Look in the mirror, Florida. We did this.

In crisis there is opportunity, but it's instructive to first consider the backstory.

A long time ago our political leaders saw clearly that Florida was headed down an unsustainable path. "Ecological destruction in Florida is nothing less than economic suicide," declared Gov. Reubin Askew in 1971.

A year later the Legislature passed landmark water management reforms, widely hailed as a national model of wise governance.

The decades passed, the pendulum swung and a new message — casting Florida's environmental protection and growth management laws as irksome impediments — was packaged and propelled with a megaphone only deep pockets can buy.

And the guiding ethos in Tallahassee shifted from a view of natural Florida as a special place to be tended with stewardship, to a view of natural Florida as a commodity to be exploited for profit.

Upholding our social contract with the future gave way to magical thinking. Blinded by the myth of endless water abundance, we ignored the truth that choices have consequences and the table was set for the mess we face today.

And now we have the 2016 water bill — widely seen as a give-away to Big Ag and Big Business: So many words, so little protection.

Nature is resilient but only to a degree. Florida is a place where 20 million people make daily choices around water which seem entirely "reasonable" to them. We have seen the net result of all that reasonableness and it is not a pretty picture. This is the tragedy of the commons writ large.

Our waters are a mess and we know how we got here:

- Groundwater overpumping
- Pollution from fertilizer and human and animal waste
- A failure of responsible government oversight
- Businesses that value their private profits over our public waters
- And lack of civic engagement

We are running out of fresh water. By the state's own estimates, Central Florida will tap out legacy water supplies within 15 years.

Yet we continue to pour half our household water budget on the ground for lawns and landscaping.

The pollutants we spread on our farms and lawns, or flush down our drains, don't just go away. Some portion of that stuff ends up in our drinking water or fuels the slime fouling our springs and beaches.

With a changing climate, warmer waters will make these problems worse, as evidenced by the toxic algae bloom in Lake Erie that left half a million Ohio residents without drinking water two summers ago.

And scientists are studying a link between cyanobacteria found in polluted Florida waters and neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer's and ALS.

We Floridians are a curious lot. We tend to change our behavior only in times of crisis, and we tend to elect politicians whose brains are wired to perceive a chance encounter with a mosquito carrying the Zika virus as a greater threat than the colossal disruption posed by the collapse of our waters.

We are missing the big picture in part because no Florida political leader has the honesty and courage to tell us that our lifestyle choices and business practices are destroying our springs and rivers and lakes and coastal waters.

When it comes to inspiring the embrace of a new water ethic — in which we use less and pollute less — the silence in Tallahassee is deafening.

My message to our political leadership is clear: It is the Earth that lies at the very center of our existence and makes possible life itself, to say nothing of human endeavors like the economy.

That line about “the business of government is business” is shallow and shortsighted. We must aim higher: The business of government is well-being.

And to our business leaders, I say there can be no long-term well-being in Florida if we continue to use and abuse our waters like there's no tomorrow.

Will this be our watershed moment? We get to decide, Florida. May wisdom be our guide.

— *John Moran is a Florida nature photographer and clean water advocate.*