Algae problems impacting election-year politics

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The state of emergency covers Lee, Glades, Hendry, Martin, Okeechobee, Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties.

Environmental protection quickly is becoming a big issue in the 2018 election as more toxic algae blooms slime estuaries, kill sea life and choke coastal Florida communities with foul air.

Florida’s tourism-driven economy depends on clean water, and candidates are under pressure to offer solutions for a problem that is so bad it led the governor to declare a state of emergency Monday in seven counties.

The issue is particularly acute in Southwest Florida, where red tide — a naturally occurring algae bloom that can be worsened by nutrient pollution from human and animal waste and excessive fertilizer use — is killing fish and other sea life from Sarasota County south to Charlotte Harbor, and green slime is smothering the Caloosahatchee River. The state of emergency covers Lee, Glades, Hendry, Martin, Okeechobee, Palm Beach and St. Lucie counties.

Investing in clean-up measures has become a popular campaign promise among candidates in both parties, and there is increasing talk of cracking down on polluters, something many GOP leaders in Florida have been reluctant to do over the years.

Environmental advocates say state and local officials have not gone far enough to curtail nutrient pollution that feeds algae blooms and — in some cases — actually have taken steps backward in recent years, with critics pointing to everything from legislation repealing septic tank inspections to cutting environmental agencies’ budgets.

The issue could impact political campaigns at all levels this year and is especially potent across a swath of the state that is crucial for GOP candidates in statewide elections.
The algae blooms largely are impacting Southwest Florida and the Treasure Coast region north of West Palm Beach, two areas with large numbers of GOP voters who could swing primary elections for statewide candidates and are critical to GOP voter turnout efforts in the general election.

U.S. Rep. Ron DeSantis, a conservative Republican from northeast Florida, has made the algae issue a centerpiece of his campaign for governor.

DeSantis is blasting his GOP opponent — Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam — for his ties to the sugar industry, which often is blamed for contributing to excessive nutrient loads that feed algae blooms in Lake Okeechobee, water that is then discharged into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers during heavy rain events, fouling those waterways.

A staunch conservative, DeSantis even said last week that he is open to new regulations on polluters.

In the Democratic primary for governor, a number of candidates have sworn off contributions from sugar companies.

And the issue also is figuring prominently in the U.S. Senate race between Republican Gov. Rick Scott and Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson.

The two have traded jabs over their environmental records and are staging events in communities impacted by the algae problem.

Scott took a boat tour of the Caloosahatchee River Monday and then promptly declared a state of emergency in the seven counties impacted by blue-green algae problem. Nelson visited algae-plagued communities on both coasts last week.

The governor is coming under fire for his failure to curb the algae blooms and their environmental impacts since taking office in 2011.

There was a devastating bloom in 2011 that blanketed the Indian River Lagoon, killing 73 square miles of seagrass beds and coinciding with the death of more than 500 manatees, dolphins and pelicans.

That same year Scott pushed through a big rollback of state growth management laws, regulations that had helped control development and its impacts, such as fertilizer runoff and human waste that leaks from septic systems.

Scott also slashed funding for the state's water management districts, which play a big role in protecting waterways, and appointed board members that critics called too deferential to polluters. And he signed legislation in 2012 that repealed a state law mandating that septic tanks receive regular inspections to
ensure they're not allowing untreated waste to seep into water systems.

Under Scott, the state also reversed course on a plan to buy sugar land to use for environmental reclamation.

Meanwhile, the algae problem has flared up repeatedly in recent years.

St. Lucie County Commissioner Chris Dzadovsky said Scott’s push to cut $700 million in property tax dollars flowing to water management districts has led to a lack of state oversight.

The South Florida Water Management District lost 300 technicians, scientists and other staff because of the reduced budget.

“Those are the agencies, those are the scientists, those are the people who regulate and keep the contaminants out of the waterways,” Dzadovsky said. “That, alone, done in the first year under Rick Scott, you are now seeing an increase in phosphorus and other contaminants in our waterways.”

Aliki Moncrief, executive director of Florida Conservation Voters, said Scott’s poor environmental record extends beyond budget cuts at state agencies.

“He’s been advancing bad policy,” she said.

Scott has accused Nelson of doing little to advance Everglades clean-up efforts during three decades in Washington, D.C. And the governor is touting his success in fast tracking repairs to the Herbert Hoover Dike, which will help negate the need for water discharges into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie.

“Governor Scott accomplished more for Lake Okeechobee and the surrounding communities in just over one year than Bill Nelson did in 30 years,” Scott spokeswoman Lauren Schenone said in a news release.