Florida’s Red Tide Stings Tourist Industry

Naturally occurring stench has caused Gov. Scott to declare a state of emergency for seven counties.

By Maya Sweedler

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Patrons of the Dry Dock Waterfront Grill on Florida’s Longboat Key usually enjoy stunning views of the Sarasota Bay. Now, they get an unpleasant stench.
A red tide—a natural phenomenon involving an accumulation of algae brought to shore by currents and wind—is killing marine life and hurting the tourism industry across Florida’s Gulf Coast. Local tourist boards are concerned the impact could be felt for a while, as news of the red tide spreads and more tourists cancel or adjust their trips.

Dry Dock assistant manager Kurt Disney said he knows when the harmful algae bloom, caused by a species called Karenia brevis, is active because “you can feel it and taste it in the air...it’s got a peppery, spicy feeling that stings in the back of your throat.”

The restaurant, which had to close its patio several nights over the past week when the red tide was particularly pungent, is losing an average of about 100 customers for lunch and between 120 and 140 for dinner, he said. On Monday night, the restaurant had just 44 reservations, less than a third of the usual amount.

State authorities have urged people to stay out of the water and off the beaches, posting signs at hundreds of beach access points along the coastline that provide information on the water conditions, health impact and resources. Many red tides emit chemicals that can irritate human respiratory systems and damage fish nervous systems. The bloom has killed turtles and other wildlife.

Florida Gov. Rick Scott declared a state of emergency Monday for seven counties and allocated half a million dollars to the state’s tourism marketing corporation to help local communities bring in visitors, as well as $900,000 to Lee County to clean up the affected areas.

Lee County has been reporting side effects, such as respiratory irritation and fish kills, longer than other counties, according to Tracy Fanara, the manager of the Environmental Health program at Florida’s Mote Marine Laboratory.
Visit Florida, the state tourism board, is creating a survey its local partners can send out to evaluate the red tide’s impact, said Stephen Lawson, vice president of communications.

In addition to offering bridge loans for businesses waiting for insurance to kick in, the state’s Department of Economic Opportunity also opened a damage-assessment survey on Tuesday to businesses affected by the red tide. It is too early to estimate the economic implications of the tide, said Tiffany Vause, the agency’s communications director.

Visit Sarasota County, the county’s official marketing body, sent a survey to 450 businesses in the tourism industry earlier this month. Of the 77 respondents, 90% reported losing business because of the red tide. The businesses surveyed reported losses of up to 6% the first week of August, compared with the same period last year, according to Visit Sarasota County.

Visit Florida is also trying to promote destinations that aren’t on the beach, Mr. Lawson said.

State authorities have urged people to stay out of the water and off the beaches. An aerial view of the red tide bloom off Manasota Beach on Wednesday shows the vastness of the affected area. PHOTO: MATT HOUSTON/VOLADOR MEDIA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
“The tricky part is we don’t know when red tide is supposed to die,” he said. “Once the tide has passed, we’ll begin disbursing the money.”

This year’s red tide, stretching 150 miles from Collier to Manatee counties, is one of the worst the state has seen, said Dr. Fanara. It began as a patchy bloom in late October and coalesced in late June. The severity of this year’s red tide is possibly a result of runoff from urban and agriculture environments, she said.

In addition to Lee County, Collier, Charlotte and Sarasota counties are also heavily affected. The red tide hasn’t made its way up to Pinellas County, where St. Petersburg is, and the tide is forecast to move south, Dr. Fanara said.

Cities are suffering from the loss of business and also shouldering the cost of cleanup. Lee County reported on Monday that its cleanup efforts have removed 1,361 tons of material. The Lee Board of County Commissioners will vote later this month on whether to use tourist tax funds to cover beach cleanup expenses through September.

“The long term effects are what we’re leery of,” said Mr. Disney of the Dry Dock Waterfront Grill. “Almost all vacationers are gone for this season....But with these stories going up north, we wonder if snowbirds, who have the option to stay where they are, will they wait until later in the year to come back?”

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