

The Delray Democrat

Florida's Waters: A Vital Asset Facing Grave Threats¹

Sen. Lori Berman

Florida's pristine waters have been an unparalleled attraction, magnetizing millions of tourists with our breathtaking beaches, winding rivers, and mystical springs. These treasures not only enchant visitors but also bolster our state's tourism sector, contributing significantly to an industry that exceeds \$101 billion. Yet, a shadow looms as Florida's water quality deteriorates, endangering both our economy and the well-being of our communities.

Disturbingly, recent studies underscore the gravity of the situation. Fecal indicator bacteria (FIB), signaling the presence of potentially harmful pathogens and waterborne diseases, are increasingly found across the state. More than one million acres of our coastal estuaries and over nine thousand miles of streams and rivers show concerning FIB levels. Alarming, Florida topped the U.S. charts last year with 873,340 acres of lakes deemed unsafe for swimming and supporting aquatic life. Contact with these polluted waters can lead to a range of health issues, from skin infections to severe conditions caused by pathogens like vibrio vulnificus, a flesh-eating bacteria.

Further compounding the issue is our faltering wastewater infrastructure. With outdated septic tanks discharging sewage into our ecosystems, we're inadvertently nurturing threats such as harmful algal blooms. A recent deluge in Fort Lauderdale brought this issue to the fore. Post-flood tests revealed fecal bacteria levels in some canals soaring to over 150 times the deemed safe limit – a contamination level surpassing that of a used public restroom.

This crisis necessitates swift and decisive legislative action. The inconsistencies in reporting and the resultant public confusion amplify the health risks. Our proposal, the Safe Waterways Act, aims to address these gaps. We call for the immediate issuance of advisories when tests highlight unsafe water conditions. Additionally, we advocate for uniform signage across the state, informing the public about water quality, especially in popular recreational spots. After all, an informed public can make safer choices.

Timely transparency isn't just about immediate safety; it emphasizes the pressing need for comprehensive water restoration. Embracing the Safe Waterways Act is more than legislation – it's a pledge to future generations. By championing this cause, we not only safeguard Florida's reputation as a coveted tourist haven but also ensure the health and prosperity of all who cherish our waters.

¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), October 2023, page 1.