



Enforcement Efforts by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection



2024 REPORT

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PREFACE



Florida is a wonderful place to call home. Florida's vast array of wildlife, water resources, and marine life deserve strong environmental policies and enforcement.

Mismanagement of environmental policy and enforcement compromises the future of our state, and like many Florida residents, I am growing increasingly concerned about the state's inability to address the serious environmental

issues that threaten our well-being, such as the growing menace of toxic water pollution and climate change. Part of the solution to these growing problems must be better enforcement of environmental laws and more transparency by the DeSantis Administration.

However, we have a lot of work to do in both of these areas. As this report indicates, the state's enforcement of environmental laws is well below its historical averages. In addition, the Governor's veto of the 2024 Safe Waterways Act shows an administration that is not serious about holding polluters accountable. The Safe Waterways Act would have provided powerful tools to warn the public about dangerous levels of pollution in their waterways and improved environmental enforcement. The stakes involved in these kinds of decisions are not just the quality of life for Floridians, but their actual lives.

Hurricanes Milton and Helene hit Florida hard last year, causing significant flooding, property damage, and loss of life. Adding insult to injury, the storms caused over 91 million gallons of pollution to spill into Florida's waterways, communities, and neighborhoods. Extreme weather events like these will only worsen with climate change.

Despite challenges, I am hopeful. It is clear that Florida residents and many elected leaders want to safeguard Florida's future and implement and enforce strong environmental policy. This report gives voice to the crucial role environmental enforcement must play in protecting public health and the environment in our state.

With all the beauty of Florida's nature comes the responsibility of working together to make Florida a better place to live for humans and wildlife alike. We hope you take a moment to read this report and give us any feedback you may have.

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SUMMARY

Since 2004, PEER has examined Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) data to assess state trends in pollution enforcement.

While there was a slight increase in the number of Florida’s environmental enforcement actions in 2024, state records show they are still well below historical averages.

Florida DEP enforces a wide array of laws that protect the state’s environment and the health of its residents. These include laws protecting air resources from industrial pollution; the quality of Florida’s water, rivers, lakes, estuaries, and wetlands; the state’s beach and dune systems; and the environment from the improper handling and disposal of solid and hazardous wastes.

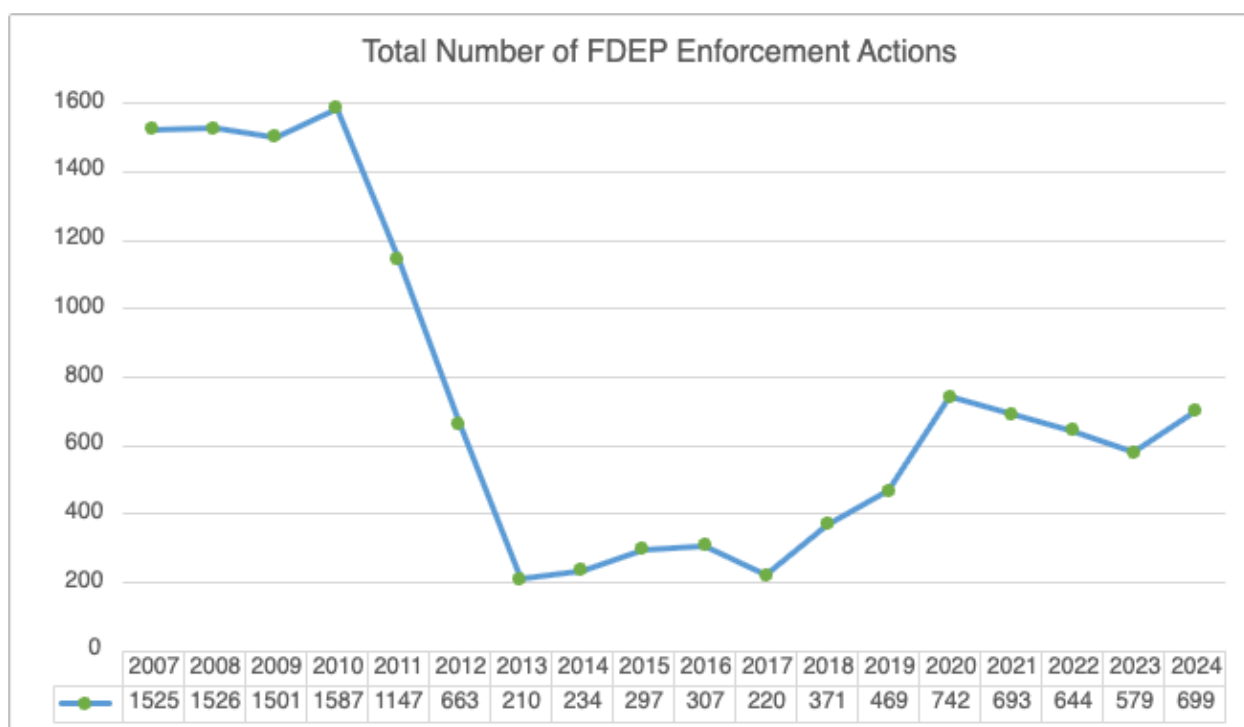
Florida’s lack of environmental law enforcement threatens the state’s water quality and its long-term economic health, including revenue from tourism. Stronger enforcement of environmental laws will help address Florida’s environmental crises.

FLORIDA ENFORCEMENT DOWNWARD TREND

In this report, PEER has compiled environmental enforcement data for thirty-six years. This data reveal an enforcement program that has been in decline for over the past fourteen years.

A steady decline in enforcement actions began after former governor Rick Scott took office in 2011. The Scott administration favored development interests at the expense of environmental protections.

Between 2010 and 2013, the number of Florida DEP enforcement actions plummeted from 1,587 to 210 under Scott's leadership.ⁱ During Scott's last full year in office in 2018, the number of enforcement actions was 371, a 77 percent decrease from 2010 levels.



Governor Ron DeSantis took office in 2019 and was publicly more supportive of environmental programs that protected water quality than his predecessor. During his first two years as Governor, environmental enforcement actions tracked by PEER increased from 371 to 742 in 2020. However, after this initial increase during DeSantis' first year in office, enforcement actions steadily declined to 579 in 2023. In 2024, a modest uptick to 699 enforcement actions occurred. However, enforcement actions initiated under Governor DeSantis are still a fraction of what they once were in 2010.

An examination of environmental enforcement trends reveals that Florida's enforcement numbers remain well below the state's historical averages. Here is some data that help illustrate this point.

- Between 1988 – 1995, Florida DEP had an average of 1,048 cases each year;
- Between 1996 – 2010, Florida DEP had an average of 1,303 cases each year;
- Between 2011 – 2018, Florida DEP had an average of 431 cases each year; and
- Between 2019 – 2024, Florida DEP had an average of 638 cases each year.

These trends mask an even bigger problem. This significant decline in enforcement has occurred during a time of explosive population growth. In 1995, Florida had a population of 14,537,875 residents. By 2010, its population grew to 18,801,310. In 2024, Florida's population was [estimated to have reached](#) 23,372,215.ⁱⁱ Under normal circumstances, this population growth would result in more environmental violations, not fewer, as businesses and development grow to accommodate this influx of residents.

ENFORCEMENT OF THE DREDGE AND FILL AND DOMESTIC WASTEWATER PROGRAMS

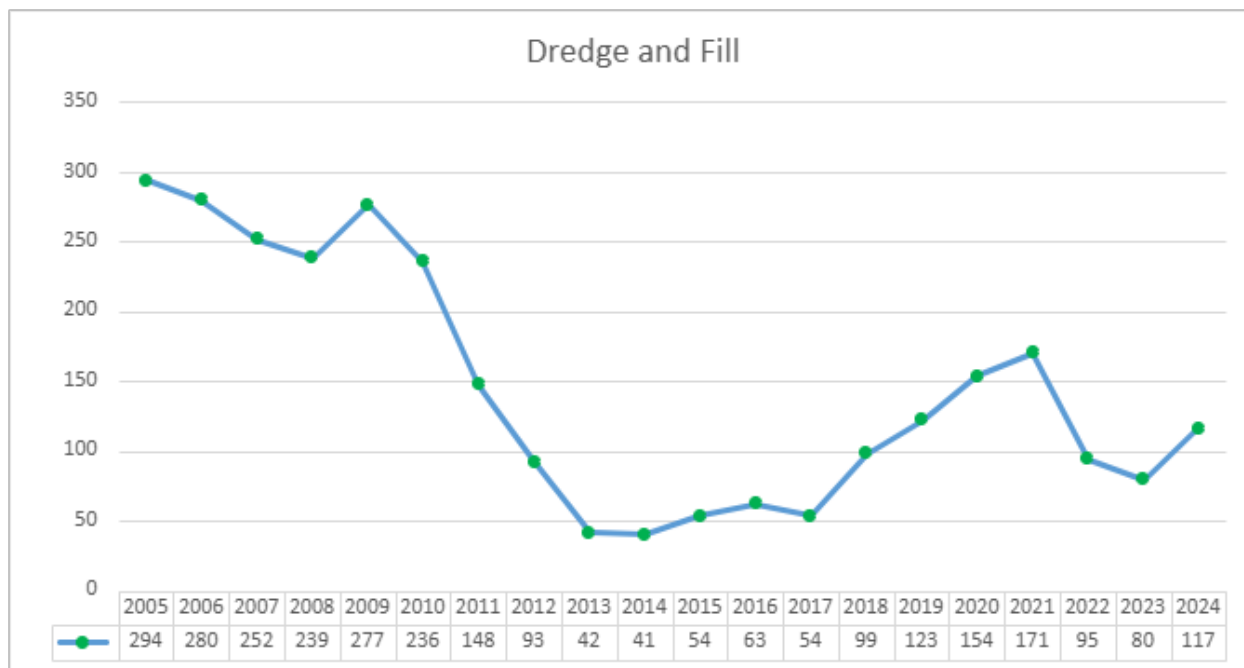
Florida's insufficient environmental enforcement actions to address ongoing problems becomes apparent when looking at the state's dredge and fill and domestic wastewater programs, two of the largest programs in Florida. The dredge and fill program covers the excavation of wetlands and surface waters and the filling of these wetlands and waters with any materials, such as rocks, sand, and sea walls. The domestic wastewater program covers the proper treatment and disposal of domestic wastewater.

DREDGE AND FILL

Until 2010, the dredge and fill program reliably initiated at least 200 cases each year. However, that changed when Governor Scott took office, at which point the number of new cases plummeted from 236 in 2010 to 41 in 2014, which marked the lowest point in the agency's history. There has been some modest improvement since then. For example, dredge and fill cases rebounded to 171 cases in 2021.

In late 2020, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) granted Florida approval to implement a Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 program, which transferred permitting and enforcement authority under CWA Section 404, the national dredge and fill program, from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to the State of Florida for a broad range of water resources within the state. During this time period, dredge and fill cases significantly decreased in 2022 to 95 cases, and in 2023 there were only 80 cases. In 2024, there was a modest increase to 117 cases, which represents about fifty percent fewer cases than in 2010.

In February 2024, a federal court issued an order divesting Florida of its authority to issue Section 404 permits in Florida in response to a lawsuit brought by environmental groups challenging EPA's approval of Florida's 404 permitting authority under the Endangered Species Act.ⁱⁱⁱ This decision is currently being appealed by both the State and EPA.^{iv}



DOMESTIC WASTEWATER

Likewise, the number of enforcement actions for Florida's domestic wastewater program has steadily declined despite massive releases of sewage into its waterways. State records indicate that since January of 2025, 761 notices of pollution have been reported. Additionally, in 2024, 2,280 incidents were reported; in 2023, 1,672 incidents were reported; in 2022, 1,832 were reported; and in 2021, 1,684 were reported.^v According to one report by WUFT^{vi}, between 2000 and early 2022, more than 2.4 billion gallons of wastewater spilled onto state lands and into state waters.

Moreover, extreme weather events, like Hurricanes Milton and Helene, are aggravating the problem. As a result of these storms, over the span of just three weeks a conservative estimate of over 91 million gallons of pollution was reportedly spilled into Florida's waterways, communities, and neighborhoods.^{vii}

Yet enforcement actions in this program are well below their historical averages. From 2005 to 2010, Florida DEP's domestic wastewater program averaged 175 enforcement actions a year. Between 2017 and 2022, the average was only 95. Consistent with the general downward trend of Florida's other environmental enforcement programs, the number of

domestic wastewater-related enforcement actions in the last few years has declined, from 125 in 2020 to 63 in 2024.



AS FLORIDA WATER QUALITY SUFFERS, AN ENFORCEMENT BACKBONE IS LACKING

As Florida’s environmental enforcement program erodes, the State lays claim to some of the dirtiest water in the country. It is fouled by pollution from sewage overflows, fertilizer runoff from farms, a reliance on septic systems from homes, and rainwater washing over impervious surfaces and carrying pollutants into waterways.

Recent data submitted by Florida DEP to EPA shows mixed news on water quality during the DeSantis administration. The data show a growing number of Florida’s water bodies, including estuaries and lakes, fail to meet water quality standards, although the quality of coastal waters and streams has improved somewhat.^{viii}

Despite this, in June 2024, Governor DeSantis vetoed the Safe Waterways Act, a bill that would have required health warnings about bacterial contamination in the ocean and other Florida waterways.^{ix} The bill would have required state Department of Health advisories if water quality did not meet standards, the closing of affected waterways if necessary, and cities and towns to notify both state officials and the public of any contaminated waterways within 24 hours. It would have also required measures for clean-water enforcement.^x

The Governor's veto of the Safe Waterways Act sends a powerful signal to local government that they can choose not to inform the public about dangerous water quality conditions on their beaches. This secrecy will mean less pressure on state and local agencies to clean up waterways and take enforcement actions against the parties responsible for this pollution.

During the 2025 legislative session, a more modest version of the Safe Waterways Act was introduced in both the Florida Senate and House of Representatives. Unfortunately, both bills "died" on June 16, 2025.^{xixii}

Florida's waterways have reached a tipping point. Cleaning them up and minimizing dangerous pathogens, other pollutants, and future harmful algae blooms will require more than money. It will also require sustainable and smart development policies coupled with more regulatory enforcement against polluters. Further, state and local governments must be honest with residents about water quality issues in their communities.

SOME IMPROVEMENT, BUT CONTINUED TROUBLE FOR MANATEES



Manatees, the iconic symbol of Florida's wildlife, are also a symbol of Florida's struggle to address water quality issues.

The total statewide manatee mortality number for 2024 was 565, which was well below the 739 average of the five most recent years and was similar to 2023 when 555 carcasses were recorded.^{xiii} Human-related causes such as watercraft- and water control structure-related mortality comprised approximately 30% of causes of death in necropsied carcasses in 2024.^{xiv}

A main culprit for manatee deaths is polluted waterways, including increased harmful algal blooms (HABs) and red tide. These HABs kill off sea grass, the staple of the manatee diet.^{xv} Additionally, manatees ingest the algae itself, which causes gastrointestinal infections and leads to their premature deaths.^{xvi} Red tide is caused by a naturally-occurring marine plankton (microscopic algae) that produces neurotoxins that are extremely harmful to manatees.^{xvii} Since the recording of manatee deaths from red tide began in 1982, there have been extensive die-offs (more than 50 manatees) in 1996, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2021.^{xviii}

On March 14, 2025, the Unusual Mortality Event (UME) from starvation due to seagrass loss affecting manatees along Florida's East Coast was administratively closed.^{xix} The elevated manatee mortality numbers associated with this UME decreased three years ago and researchers have not documented a manatee death from starvation linked to a lack of forage for two years.^{xx}

However, there is still much more work to do. Researchers from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission project a spike in manatee deaths in 2025. So far, there have been 414 deaths as of June 13, 2025, compared with 340 in 2024.^{xxi} An unusually cold winter and a red tide algae bloom in southwest Florida are responsible for the increase in deaths.^{xxii} State-level environmental enforcement will need to play a large role in safeguarding manatees by keeping waterways clean, thereby protecting seagrass from being killed off.

CONCLUSION

Thirty-six years of Florida environmental enforcement data compiled by PEER depict an enforcement program in crisis, hollowed out relentless assaults on environmental protections by government leaders over the past fourteen years.

Florida, which prides itself on clean water and marine life and derives a significant percentage of its income from tourists who come to experience its natural beauty, is known as the state with significant water quality challenges. Unfortunately, Governor DeSantis' veto of the Safe Waterways Act shows how he puts polluters above the health and well-being of those dependent on clean water in Florida.

The Governor's prioritization of polluters over public health is backed up by environmental enforcement data. The data show a stagnant environmental enforcement program since 2020 with enforcement activity well below the historical averages. Pouring money into infrastructure projects will not be enough to clean up Florida's dirty water and address other looming environmental crises in Florida. Holding polluters accountable through enforcement actions must be part of the equation.

ⁱ PEER defines enforcement as the sum of Case Reports, all Consent Orders, Notice of Violations, and Final Orders. See Appendix A for more information.

ⁱⁱ *QuickFacts Florida*, U.S. CENSUS (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/FL>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dickinson Wright, *Florida Loses Wetland Permitting Authority*, JDSUPRA (April 3, 2024), [https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/florida-loses-wetland-permitting-5089826/#:~:text=The%20underlying%20action%20challenged%20in,Waters%20of%20the%20U.S.%2C%20includ; see also Jeffrey R. Porter, *The Judge's Decision Vacating EPA's Approval of Florida's "Dredge and Fill" Permit Authority Has Serious Implications for our Renewable Energy Future*, NATL. L.REV. 176 \(Feb. 2024\), <https://natlawreview.com/article/judges-decision-vacating-epas-approval-floridas-dredge-and-fill-permit-authority>.](https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/florida-loses-wetland-permitting-5089826/#:~:text=The%20underlying%20action%20challenged%20in,Waters%20of%20the%20U.S.%2C%20includ; see also Jeffrey R. Porter, The Judge's Decision Vacating EPA's Approval of Florida's 'Dredge and Fill' Permit Authority Has Serious Implications for our Renewable Energy Future, NATL. L.REV. 176 (Feb. 2024), https://natlawreview.com/article/judges-decision-vacating-epas-approval-floridas-dredge-and-fill-permit-authority)

^{iv} *Florida 404 Program and Litigation*, U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (last visited July 10, 2025), <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2025-02/ogc-wlo-florida-404-program-and-litigation.pdf>.

^v *Pollution Notice Enterprise Solutions*, FL. DEP. OF ENV. PROT. (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://prodenv.dep.state.fl.us/DepPNP/reports/viewIncidentDetails?page=1>.

^{vi} Alexandra Harris, *Spillover*, WUFT NEWS AND THE UF COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM AND COMMUNICATIONS (last visited July 7, 2024), <https://projects.wuoft.org/watershed/2022/08/15/spillover/>.

^{vii} Mia McCormick, *Pollution spills caused by hurricane season*, ENVIRONMENT FLORIDA (October 25, 2024), <https://environmentamerica.org/florida/center/resources/pollution-spills-caused-by-hurricane-milton/>.

^{viii} Jacob Reyes, *Is Florida's water 'dirtier' under DeSantis? Here's what the data show*, TAMPA BAY TIMES (January 15, 2023), <https://www.tampabay.com/news/florida-politics/2023/01/15/desantis-environment-water-lindsay-cross-politifact-red-tide/#:~:text=Its%20report%20was%20released%20March,for%20swimming%20and%20aquatic%20life>.

^{ix} Anthony Man, *DeSantis vetoes bill to improve public warnings about bacteria contaminating beaches, public waterways*, SUNSENTINEL (June 29, 2024), <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/2024/06/29/desantis-vetoes-bill-to-improve-public-warnings-about-bacteria-contaminating-beaches-public-waterways/>.

^x *HB 177 (2023) – Safe Waterways Act*, FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (last visited July 21, 2025), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/177/?Tab=BillText>.

^{xi} *SB 156 (2025) – Safe Waterways Act*, FLORIDA SENATE (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2025/156/ByVersion>.

^{xii} *HB 73 (2025) – Safe Waterways Act*, FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2025/73>.

^{xiii} *2024 Manatee Mortality in Review*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited July 21, 2025), <https://myfwc.com/research/manatee/rescue-mortality-response/statistics/mortality/2024/review/>. In 2025, Manatee deaths are again on pace to set record mortality rates due to a variety of factors, including boat strikes, cold water, red tide and water quality issues. *2025 Manatee Mortality in Review*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited July 27, 2025), <https://myfwc.com/media/zozgkr5n/preliminary.pdf>.

^{xiv} *Id.*

^{xv} *Manatee mortality in Mud River during winter 2024*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited June 24, 2024), <https://myfwc.com/research/manatee/rescue-mortality-response/statistics/mortality/2024/mud-river/>.

^{xvi} *Id.*

^{xvii} *Red Tide*, SAVE THE MANATEE (last visited July 21, 2025), <https://savethemanatee.org/manatees/red-tide/>.

^{xviii} *Id.*

^{xix} *Closed Manatee Mortality Event Along the East Coast*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited July 21, 2025), <https://myfwc.com/research/manatee/rescue-mortality-response/ume/>.

^{xx} *Id.*

^{xxi} *Preliminary 2025 Manatee Mortality Table with 5-year Summary*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited July 21, 2025), chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/<https://myfwc.com/media/zozgkr5n/preliminary.pdf>.

^{xxii} Kylie Williams, *Florida manatee deaths again raising alarms*, GREENWIRE (June 23, 2025), <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/eenews/2025/06/23/florida-manatee-deaths-again-raising-alarms-00412896>.