



PEER
PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
RESPONSIBILITY



Majority of Florida Waterways Fail Water Quality Standards as State Enforcement Remains Near Historic Lows



Florida Enforcement 2025 Report

Prepared by
Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility
Waterkeepers Florida
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PREFACE

Clean water is the lifeblood of Florida. It is essential to Florida's environment, economy, and way of life. It fuels a tourism, recreation, and fishing industry worth billions of dollars each year, attracts visitors from around the world to our beaches, springs, estuaries, and coral reefs, and sustains the rivers, lakes, and coastlines that generations of Floridians have enjoyed. Healthy waterways also provide critical habitat for manatees, wading birds, sea turtles, and countless other species, making clean water one of Florida's most valuable natural resources.



Yet, Florida's future is increasingly at risk as environmental mismanagement and inadequate oversight continue to compromise 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.

Part of the solution to our state's growing environmental challenges is stronger enforcement of environmental laws, coupled with greater attention to major sources of water pollution, including agricultural runoff, wastewater discharges, and excess fertilizer.

Despite these challenges, I am hopeful. Floridians and many elected leaders want to safeguard our state's future through strong environmental policy. This report gives voice to the crucial role enforcement and water quality standards play in protecting public health and the environment.

We hope you'll read it and share your feedback.

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SUMMARY

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

This year, we have added a section on the state of water quality in Florida. Waterkeepers Florida developed and wrote this section based on data compiled by the Florida DEP.

Florida DEP is tasked with enforcing a wide array of laws that are intended to 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.

The conclusions found in this report are simple and a cause for concern. In terms of enforcement of pollution laws in Florida, this report finds that while there was a slight increase in the number of Florida's environmental enforcement actions in 2025 over 2024, state records show they are still well below historical averages.

In terms of the quality of state waters, state data indicate the majority of waters in the state are not attaining water quality standards. The most prevalent types of pollution in waterways across the state are fecal bacteria and nutrient pollution.

The causes of failing water quality in Florida include lax policy and poor enforcement of existing laws.

The lack of environmental law enforcement and policies to protect Florida waters is a major threat to the state's water quality and its long-term economic health, including revenue from tourism.

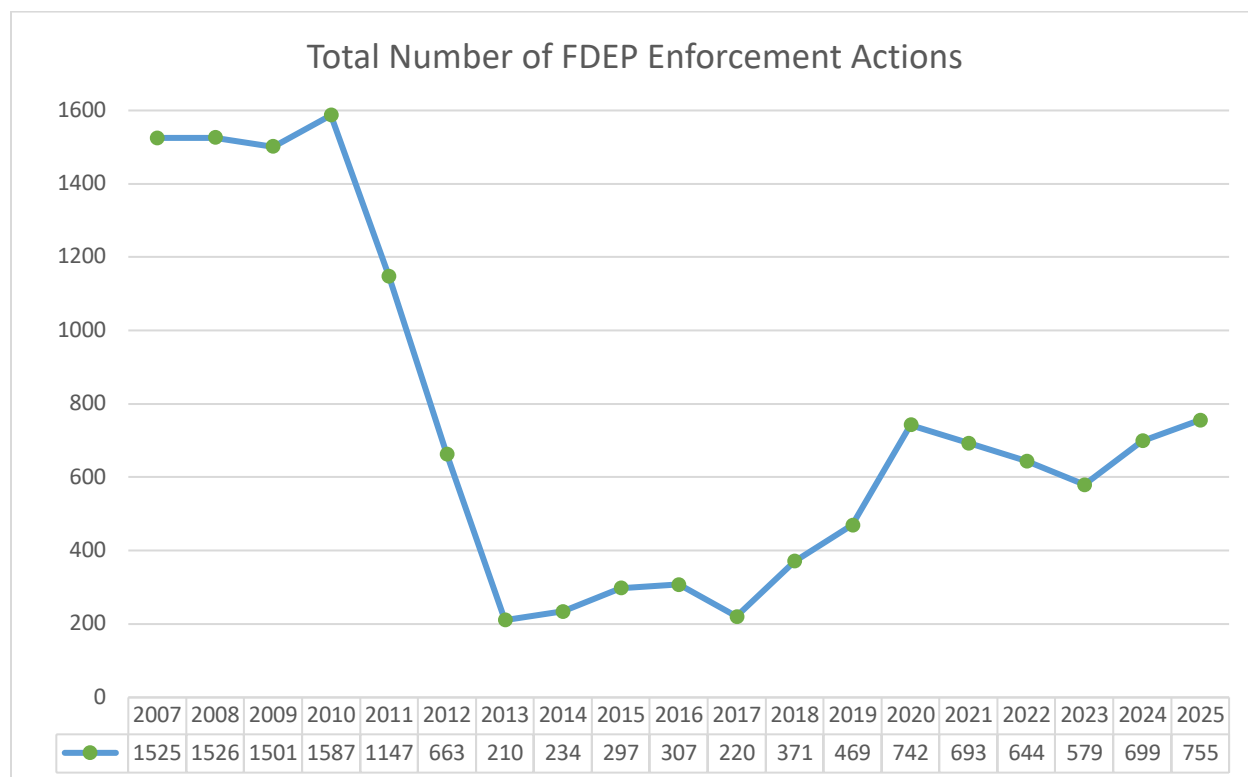
Stronger enforcement of existing environmental laws and more protective policies to control pollution will help address Florida's environmental crises.

FLORIDA ENFORCEMENT DOWNWARD TREND

In this report, PEER has compiled environmental enforcement data for thirty-seven years. The data reveal an enforcement program which has declined sharply in recent 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. During Scott's last full year in office in 2018, the number of enforcement actions was just 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. In 2025, this trend continued with an increase to 755 enforcement actions. However, enforcement actions initiated under Governor DeSantis are still less than half of what they 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 – 2025, Florida DEP had an average of 654 cases each year.

These trends mask an even bigger problem. While the data indicate an increase in enforcement actions in recent years, they are nowhere near what they were fifteen years ago. 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 2025, Florida's population was [estimated to have reached](#) 23,462,518.ⁱ 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.

Furthermore, fewer enforcement actions are not likely the result of fewer violations as evidenced by the data declining water quality in Florida, which presents data that show that the majority of waterways across the state fail to meet their designated water quality standards. Widespread failure to meet water quality standards signals that pollution is putting drinking water sources, aquatic ecosystems, and public health at risk across the state.

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.

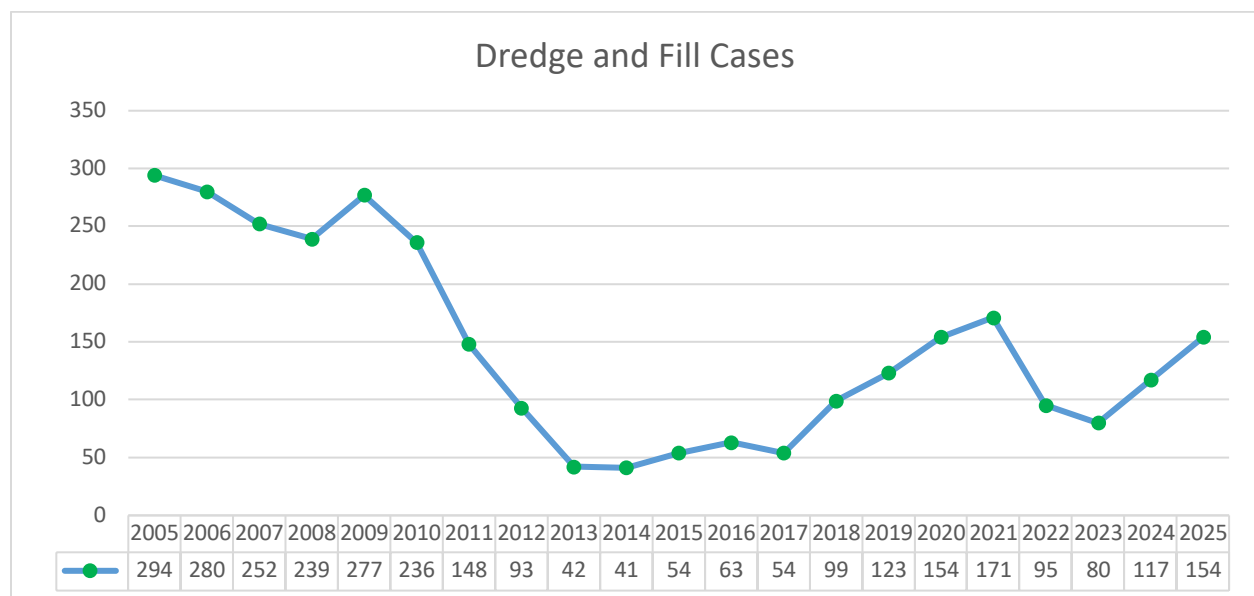
DREDGE AND FILL

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. This transfer was made in the face of widespread concerns from organizations regarding inadequate environmental protections and insufficient bandwidth for the state to adequately manage the program.

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, followed by an additional uptick to 154 cases in 2025. While the continued progress is encouraging, more work is still needed to regain the ground that was lost over the last fifteen years.

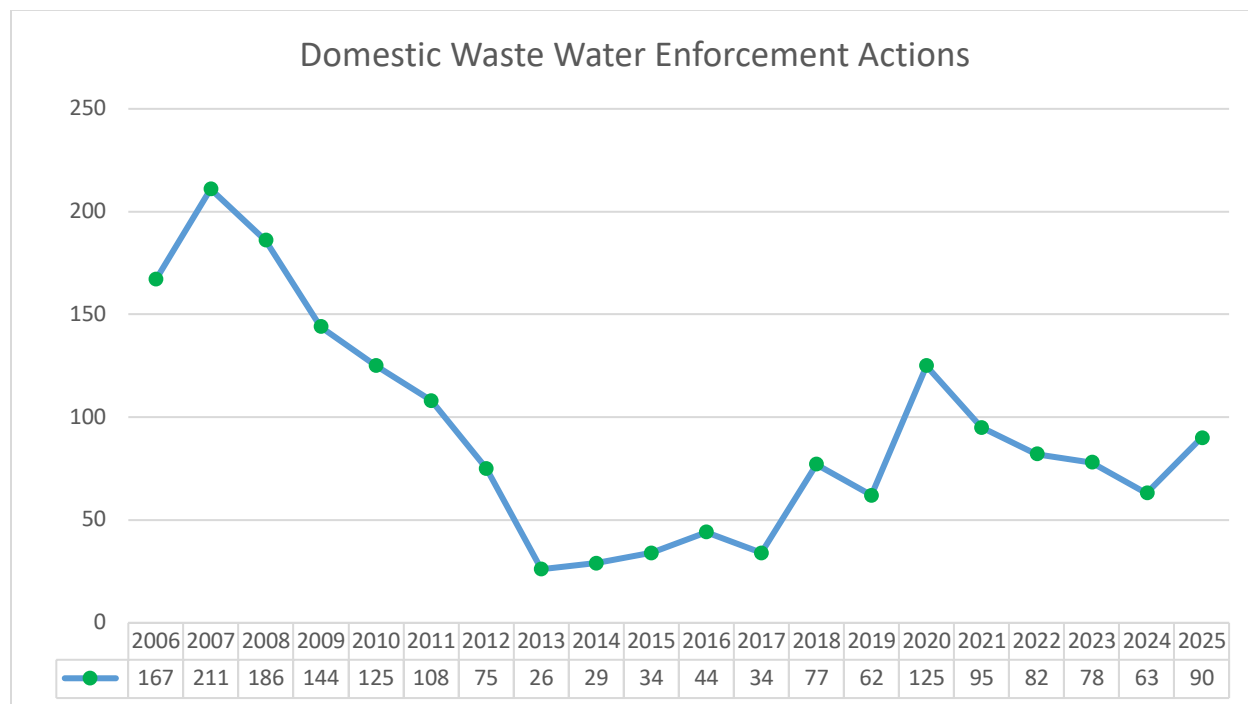
In February 2024, a federal court issued an order divesting Florida of its authority to issue Section 404 permits in Florida in response to a lawsuit brought by environmental groups challenging EPA's approval of Florida's 404 permitting authority under the Endangered Species Act.ⁱⁱ This action was the result of a lawsuit filed by a coalition of conservation organizations, including St. John's Riverkeeper and Miami Waterkeeper. This decision is currently being appealed by both the State and EPA.ⁱⁱⁱ



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 between January of 2026 and July 7, 2026, 755 notices of pollution have been reported. Additionally, in 2025, 1,593 incidents were reported; 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.^{iv} According to one report by WUFT^v, between 2000 and early 2022, more than 2.4 billion gallons of wastewater spilled onto state lands and into state waters.

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 2021 and 2025, the average was only 82. 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. While there was a modest uptick in 2025 to 90 enforcement actions, more work will have to be done to improve confidence in the program.



The State of Florida Waters

Background

Water is the lifeblood of our state. Our economy, public health, and quality of life all depend on clean water. However, years of lax policy and enforcement have resulted in a dangerous decline in water quality statewide. The most prevalent types of pollution in waterways across the state are fecal bacteria and nutrient pollution.

Fecal bacteria pollution can make waterways unsafe for swimming, fishing, and other recreational activities. Elevated levels of bacteria such as *E. coli* and enterococci indicate the presence of fecal contamination, which may contain pathogens that can cause illness in humans. Common sources of fecal bacteria include failing septic systems, sewer overflows, pet waste, livestock operations, and stormwater runoff that carries waste from developed areas into nearby waterways.

Nutrient pollution occurs when excessive amounts of nitrogen and phosphorus enter rivers, lakes, estuaries, and coastal waters. These nutrients can fuel harmful algal blooms, reduce water clarity, and contribute to low-oxygen conditions that stress or kill fish, shellfish, and other aquatic life. Major sources of nutrient pollution include fertilizer runoff from lawns and agricultural lands, wastewater discharges, septic systems, and stormwater runoff from urban areas.

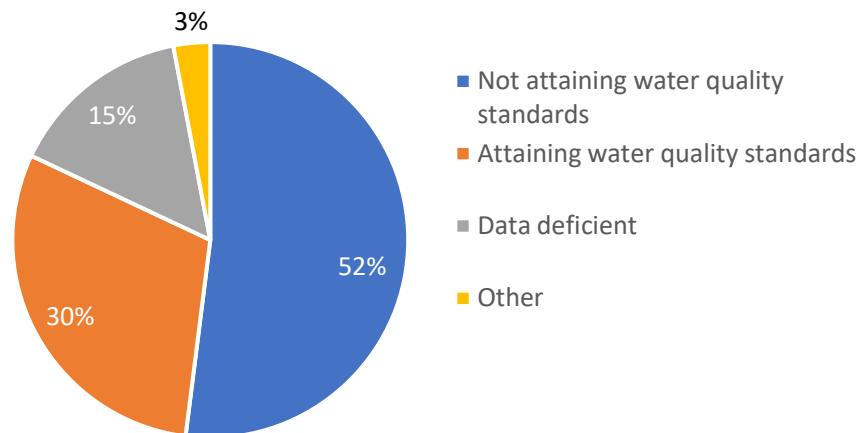
Despite the importance of our waterways to our public health, our economy, and our way of life as Floridians, the majority of waterways across the state fail to meet their designated water quality standards.

Analysis

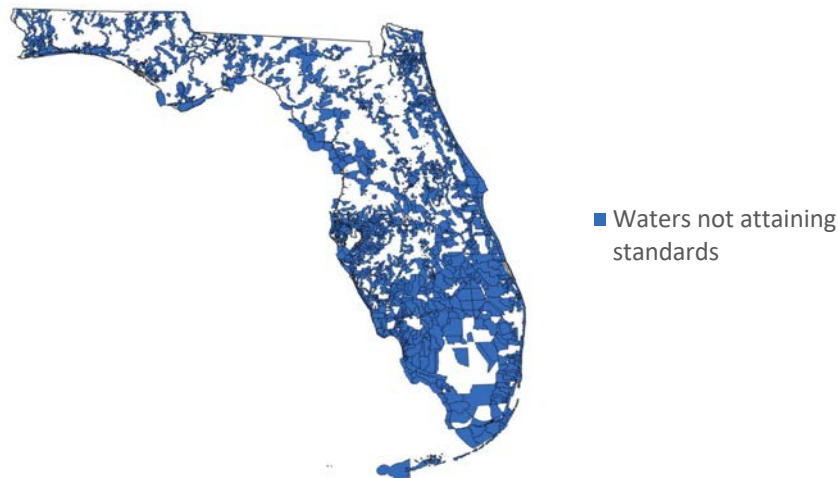
- The Clean Water Act (CWA) requires states to adopt water quality standards to support specific designated uses for each waterbody. The majority of Florida waters have designations indicating that they should be clean enough to support aquatic life and safe for human activities like swimming and boating without posing health risks.
- Section 303(d) of the CWA requires states to identify and list waters that do not meet applicable water quality standards. Every two years, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) assesses waterbodies across the state and determines which waterbodies are and are not attaining their assigned water quality standards.

- According to FDEP's 2026 Integrated Water Quality Assessment, 30% of assessed waterbodies are attaining water quality standards, 52% of assessed waterbodies are not attaining water quality standards, 15% of assessed waterbodies are data deficient, and 3% are not attaining water quality standards due to natural conditions.
- FDEP's ['Waters Not Attaining Standards' map](#)

Waterbody Condition by Assessment Status



Waters Not Attaining Standards



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 and golf courses, 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 show 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.^{vi}

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 where people swim.^{vii} 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.^{viii}

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.

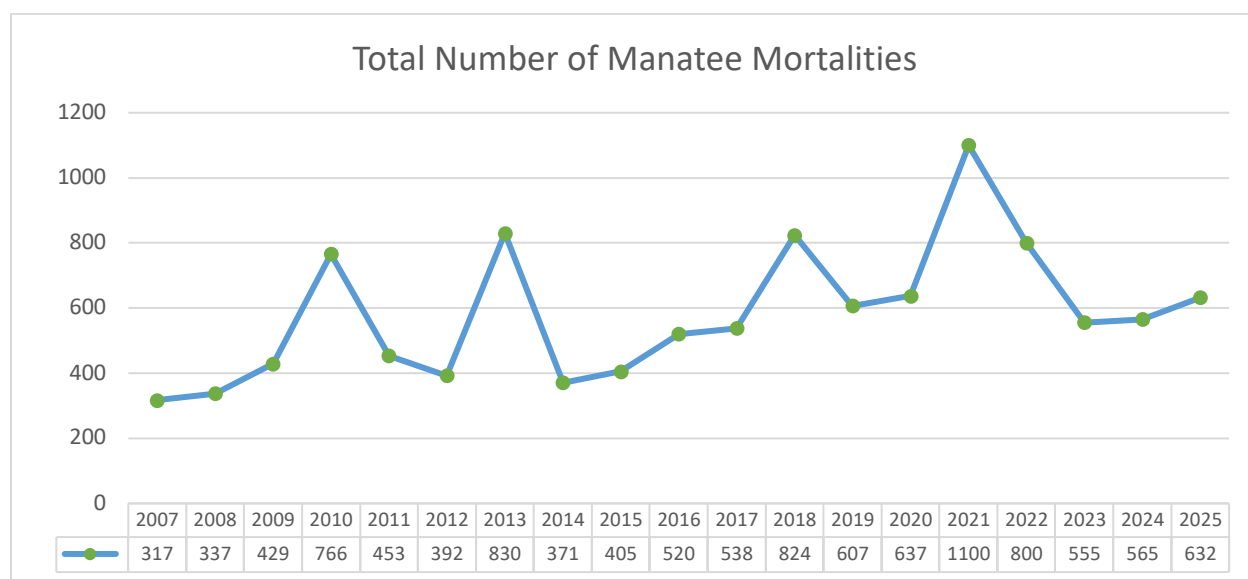
During the 2025 legislative session, a more modest version of the Safe Waterways Act was introduced in both the Florida Senate and House of Representatives. Unfortunately, both bills "died" on June 16, 2025.^{ixx}

Florida's waterways have reached a tipping point. Cleaning them up and minimizing dangerous pathogens, other pollutants, and future harmful algal 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 so we can work toward science-based solutions.

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 2025 was 632, which was well below the 731 average of the five most recent years.^{xi} Human-related causes such as watercraft- and water control structure-related mortality comprised approximately 30% of causes of death in necropsied carcasses in 2025.^{xii}



A major 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.^{xiii} Additionally, manatees ingest the algae itself, which causes gastrointestinal infections and can lead to their premature deaths.^{xiv} Red tide is caused by a naturally-occurring marine plankton (microscopic algae) that produces neurotoxins that are extremely harmful to manatees.^{xv} 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.^{xvi}

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.^{xvii} 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.^{xviii}

The good news is that cleaner waterways will help wildlife like manatees survive. By reducing pollutants, these environments allow native seagrass to regrow, help prevent starvation, and reduce algae from blocking the sunlight.

CONCLUSION

Thirty-seven 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 fifteen 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, the magnitude of waterways failing to meet their designated water quality standards underscores the inadequacies of the current regulatory program.

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 *QuickFacts Florida*, U.S. CENSUS (last visited March 11, 2026), <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/FL>.

ⁱⁱ 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%20incl,uding; 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%20incl,uding; 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).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Florida 404 Program and Litigation*, U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (last visited March 11, 2026), <https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2025-02/ogc-wlo-florida-404-program-and-litigation.pdf>.

^{iv} *Pollution Notice Enterprise Solutions*, FL. DEP. OF ENV. PROT. (last visited March 11, 2026), <https://prodenv.dep.state.fl.us/DepPNP/reports/viewIncidentDetails?page=1>.

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

^{vi} Yacob 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>.

^{vii} 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/>.

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- ^{viii} *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>.
- ^{ix} *SB 156 (2025) – Safe Waterways Act*, FLORIDA SENATE (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2025/156/ByVersion>.
- ^x *HB 73 (2025) – Safe Waterways Act*, FLORIDA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES (last visited July 3, 2025), <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2025/73>.
- ^{xi} *2025 Manatee Mortality in Review*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited March 11, 2026), <https://myfwc.com/media/k0fe0awp/yeartodate.pdf> . . *2026 Manatee Mortality in Review*, FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION (last visited July 27, 2025), <https://myfwc.com/media/zozgkr5n/preliminary.pdf>.
- ^{xii} *Id.*
- ^{xiii} *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/>.
- ^{xiv} *Id.*
- ^{xv} *Red Tide*, SAVE THE MANATEE (last visited July 21, 2025), <https://savethemanatee.org/manatees/red-tide/>.
- ^{xvi} *Id.*
- ^{xvii} *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/>.
- ^{xviii} *Id.*