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WEEK OF JULY 10-16, 2019

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Vol. XIII, No. 14 • FREE

## State seeks all ideas that could clean up algae outbreaks

BY JIM TURNER  
News Service of Florida

Experts looking into toxic algae outbreaks that have exploded in state waterways want to know if anyone has a proven, innovative cleanup strategy that can be used.

And they want to know quickly.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is formally accepting information through July 15 on ways to prevent, combat or clean up harmful algal blooms in freshwater bodies and estuaries.

Thomas Frazer, Florida's chief science officer, said July 1 during a state Blue-Green Algae Task Force meeting in Fort Myers that he and other officials at the state department have already been fielding calls from people with ideas about fighting the algae.

"I wouldn't want to limit the people who have expressed interest," Mr. Frazer said. "There are times that people may not have a ton of preliminary data ... but sometimes there are really good ideas."

The better ideas will go before the task force at its Aug. 1 meeting, Mr. Frazer said.

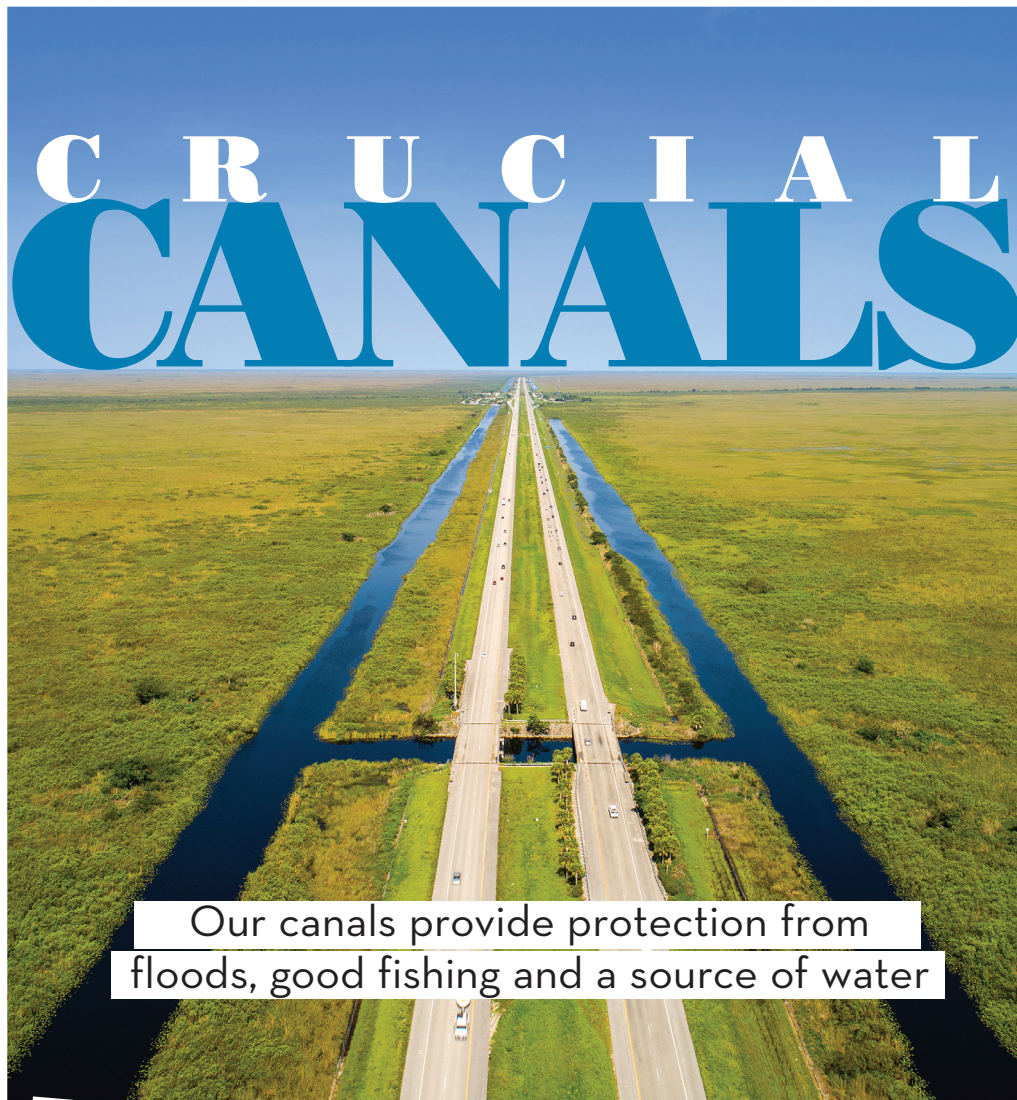
Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order in January to create the task force in response to outbreaks of toxic algae and red tide across the state last year.

The source of outbreaks in Florida and the Gulf of Mexico is blooms of a single-celled organism called *Karenia brevis* algae, which produces

SEE ALGAE, A16 ▶



GOVERNOR'S PRESS OFFICE  
Gov. Ron DeSantis appoints Dr. Thomas K. Frazer as chief science officer.



## CRUCIAL CANALS

Our canals provide protection from floods, good fishing and a source of water

BY EVAN WILLIAMS  
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People dug out thousands of miles of canals in South Florida in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, draining wetlands to control the flow of water so millions of residents could live in coastal urban regions that would otherwise not be habitable.

The canals, some of them, enable agriculture and provide a means of transportation. They flush increasingly polluted flood water into the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean, are often nonetheless rich with fish and wildlife, and swallow up murder weapons and cars and shopping carts and bodies and port-a-johns and trampolines

SEE CANALS, A12 ▶

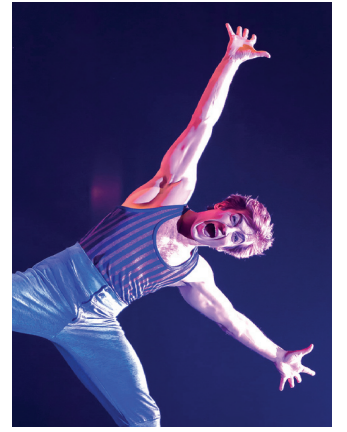


Clockwise from top: Canals bumper both sides of Alligator Alley; a car in a canal in Collier County; a no-swim sign is posted in Fort Myers; folks take in the view at the Intracoastal Waterway in Venice.



PHOTOS BY EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY; SHUTTERSTOCK; COLLIER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

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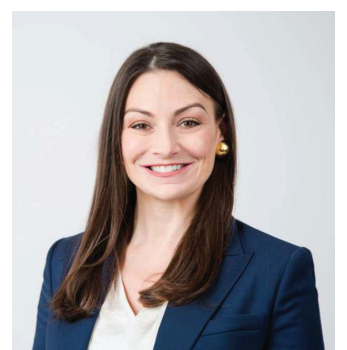
**Dreams of a clown**  
Cirque du Soleil's "Corteo" tumbles into the Hertz Arena. **C1 ▶**



**Business**  
Wilma Boyd says determination has driven the success of her business for 35 years. **A30 ▶**



**Stephanie Davis**  
Little idea — let's do lunch — grows into tradition. **C1 ▶**



**Millionaires' row**  
Cabinet members post seven-digit net worths. **A20 ▶**

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“The land was drained, and really at the expense of the environment, but at the time the mentality was focused in a different area than the culture we have today, which is very environmentally conscious.” — **Randy Smith** SFWMD spokesperson



Manuel Branch Canal intersects with Ten Mile Canal just past the end of Canal Street in Fort Myers.

EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

# CANALS

From page 1

— “just about anything you can see in South Florida that isn’t tied down,” says Tommy Stroud, director of the Lake Worth Drainage District. They boost real estate values the most where they offer direct boat access to the ocean.

South Florida canals like a network of roads flow out of Lake Okeechobee running long and straight through inland countryside, some more than 100 feet wide and 30 feet deep, before connecting with secondary systems coursing through heavily populated urban centers where they are fed by neighborhood canals, the smallest of which may only be a leap across and inches deep

on a dry day. Some are mucky and shine with oily runoff while others appear as quaint as plein air paintings.

The South Florida Water Management District operates and maintains the largest, state-owned tier, the major highway arterials of South Florida water conveyance: 2,100 miles of canals and levees along with hundreds of water-control structures that include 70 massive pumping stations, built starting more than a century ago by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. They flow through 16 counties, home to 8.1 million people, from Orlando to the Florida Keys. The Caloosahatchee River where it flows from Lake Okeechobee (C-43) and the St. Lucie Canal (C-44) are probably the most notorious ones because they are used to flush “fresh” water, polluted with nitrogen and phosphorus, to the east and west coasts when Lake O



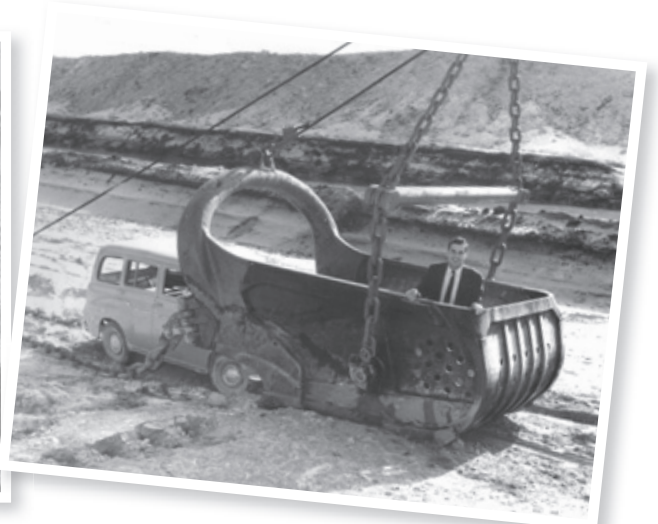
EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY  
Manuel Branch Canal at Manuel’s Branch Neighborhood Park in Fort Myers.

“This allows all of us to move down here and to live and prosper and stay dry,” he said. “...The land was drained, and really at the expense of the environment, but at the time the mentality was focused in a different area than the culture we have today, which is very environmentally conscious.”

The West Palm Beach Canal (C-51), which flows just behind Mr. Smith’s office, is the main source of flood control for roughly 250,000 households. It’s one of a handful of main veins that flow out of Lake O toward the southeast coastline.

South of C-51, the Lake Worth Drainage District’s 500-plus miles of canals and a series of gated water-control structures stretch from Okeechobee Road to the Palm Beach-Broward county line. Excavated between 1915 and 1930 to supply water for agriculture in eastern Palm

gets too full, which has resulted in toxic blue-green algal blooms. But it’s also a system we rely on in order to live here. SFWMD spokesperson Randy Smith said it costs \$100 million to \$200 million each year to keep the canal system in good working order.



CAPE CORAL HISTORICAL MUSEUM PHOTOS

From left: Some of the heavy equipment used by workers hired by Cape Coral founders the Rosen brothers, to dredge canals. Their company, Gulf American Land Corp. (GAC), used the dirt for lots. Early Cape Coral seen from above. GAC salesman Ken Schwartz poses with dredging equipment. Cape Coral has 378 miles of canals.

Beach County, they are among a secondary tier in the South Florida system.

The Lake Worth District runs on an \$18.5 million per year budget, providing flood control and holding back water during dry spells to preserve ground water tables. It also still provides water to grow winter vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers, said the district's director, Mr. Stroud. Other canals supply water for the state's vast sugar cane fields.

"The people who originally built them never envisioned the kind of population that we have today existing along the east coast of Florida," Mr. Stroud said. "But irrespective of that, the canal system continues to do its job very well. In other words, they did a really good job of laying out and designing this canal network because even with the additional pressure of all the residential development, it still functions and provides flood protection for about half the population of Palm Beach County.

"I guess when you look at the broader history of water management in South Florida, the culture at the time (when modern canals were first built) saw the Everglades as something that needed to be 'reclaimed.' And what they meant by that is 'let's drain it and then we can grow crops on it or (build) houses or whatever.' But today the culture has changed 180 degrees. Those areas are now seen as having real environmental value. We want to preserve them. And yet the system still has to do its job. At the same time we're trying to avoid its environmental impact, you still have millions of people who live along the east coast that need flood protection when it's raining and (a water supply) when it's really dry, and the canal network affords that."

On the southwest coast, the city of Cape Coral claims 156 miles of freshwater and 222 miles of saltwater/gulf access canals without which much of the area would be wetlands with natural pine flatwoods. In dredging the canals starting in the late 1950s, the city's founders both drained the swamp and provided dirt on which to build and sell homes during the height of the post-World War II American Empire era.

By today's standards the city's construction is a model of bad and even just oddball urban and environmental planning. But the canals aren't going anywhere, being crucial to almost 190,000 people who reside in the Cape, which continues to be one of the fastest growing urban areas in the United States. They stand as a human fascination and homage to one of the most determined home-sales campaigns in history.

A water resource scientist and Calusa Waterkeeper, leading the nonprofit and its mission to protect Lake Okeechobee, the Caloosahatchee River, Charlotte Harbor and surrounding watersheds, John Cassani was impressed by a "bizarre and startling" image of the city at full buildout all spread out from above in a somewhat recent article in *The Boston Globe*.

"I think just the artificial nature of it," he said, struck him. "Its incredible residential density and how we've so incredibly manipulated the landscape to achieve this bizarre outcome."

One of the Cape's early residents, Brian Bartos, used to swim and fish in the canals with his friends when he was growing up in the late 1960s and 1970s. The city was incorporated in 1970.

"My friends and I would build little rafts and (cruise) up and down the canals, the Huck Finn-Tom Sawyer type of thing," said Mr. Bartos, who is an attorney and board member of the Cape Coral Historical Society & Museum.

"We would build like one big raft. You put Styrofoam on the bottom of plywood and stuff and take long poles and just go up and down the canals with them and move it by just pushing the pole along. We could go one house to



The East Venice Avenue bridge crosses the Intracoastal Waterway canal in Venice.

EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

another for our friends.

"Every once in a while back then you would encounter an alligator. The alligators would be sunning themselves on the banks of the canals that didn't have seawalls. That's when we did not go swimming."

While Mr. Bartos remembers catching primarily catfish out of the canals as a kid, they host a wide range of fish.

Saltwater canals that connect with Charlotte Harbor often carry species such as snook, black drum and redfish, said Betty Staugler, Charlotte County Sea Grant extension agent for UF/IFAS.

"When you get into more brackish and up into the freshwater areas you'll see a lot of Mayan cichlid and tilapia, which are a little trickier to catch. You can even get into gars the fresher you go, until you hit freshwater and then you're into panfish and some of the bass. Around some of the freshwater weirs, pickerel. That's kind of where I've seen them."

Peter Schulz, co-owner of Fishing Headquarters in Jupiter, offered some tips on fishing in local canals this summer. Saltwater canals have often been good spots to fish for snook while freshwater canals contain bass, bluegill, catfish and mudfish.

"You just never know what you're going to catch out of the inshore freshwater canals," Mr. Schulz said. "During the summer months when we get more rain like June, July and August, the water levels are higher and if you get out there early in the morning you have a good chance of getting some really nice bass



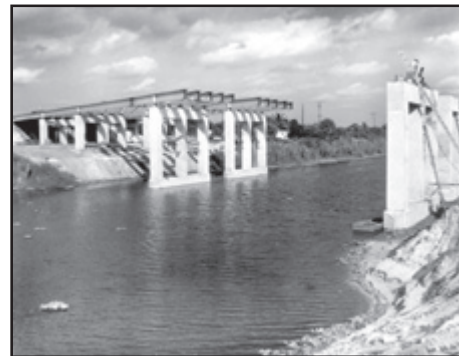
COURTESY SGT. JIM BAKER, COLLIER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Collier County Sheriff's Office Sgt. Jim Baker (at right) by a car that was dragged out of a canal on I-75 near mile marker 70.



COURTESY IMAGES

A canal dug through sugar cane and a bridge being built to cross a canal in Palm Beach County.



first thing in the morning. With the rainstorms that we get every afternoon in the summer, after the rainstorms pass it's also good to fish in the evening just before dark. I would suggest top-water plugs in the morning and rubber, worms, rubber frogs, any of that plastic type lure down near the bottom in the evening.

On Interstate 75 at mile marker 70 where it runs through the Big Cypress Preserve (Alligator Alley), the road takes an S-curve that has caused inattentive motorists over the years to lose control of their vehicles and swerve into the deep roadside canal, said Sgt. Jim Baker, who has been a member of the Collier County Sheriff's Office dive team since 1995.

There are often alligators in canals near where he is diving, and while he keeps his distance, he's more afraid of water moccasins, which can be far more aggressive.

Sgt. Baker recalled diving at the 70 mile marker to hook a cable up so a car could be towed out. The murky water offered little visibility. There seemed to

be a big log jammed under a front tire that he kept trying to pull out. It wasn't until the car was clear of the water that he could see it was a dead alligator stuck in the fender well, apparently trapped when the car went down.

In more recent years, the state installed cables along the interstate that are strong enough to catch most vehicles before they end up in the water, drastically reducing such incidents along Alligator Alley.

With experience diving in most of the canals in Collier County at one time or another, Sgt. Baker has found that canals tend to be cleaner as they grow further from urban areas. On his first dive as a CCSO officer, he was looking for a weapon used in a crime.

"I actually found a gun — it was the wrong gun, but I found a gun," he said.

The detritus he encounters beneath the surface often reflect the human environment: cash registers, a gun safe, knives, fire extinguishers. Near construction sites he has often found building materials such as rebar and concrete scraps. Near where children live he has found bicycles.

"A lot of people use canals as a dumping ground, unfortunately," he said. "We find them just full of garbage sometimes."

Once, he and other officers discovered an old van that had long been submerged, for maybe 30, 35 years.

SEE CANALS, A14 ►



# CANALS

From page 13

“This was probably 10 or 12 years ago,” he said. “The water level had gotten really low. I don’t know if they ever figured out whose it was.”

On a rainy Saturday morning there was no one at Manuel Branch canal (named for Fort Myers founder Manuel A. Gonzalez) where it runs through a small park behind Fort Myers High School. Upstream, at Fowler Street, a filthy ibis wandered the bank.

There was no one catching blue crabs out of a canal along Veronica Shoemaker Boulevard that day, although a man selling watermelons out of his truck on the other side of the street said he once did. And there was no one but the dead at Oak Ridge Cemetery in Dunbar which abuts a small canal running under oak trees hung with Spanish moss that connects with Billy’s Creek, where a soccer game commenced near the Marsh Avenue bridge.

Later that afternoon in Port Charlotte in the growing heat and humidity there were no families as there sometimes are to view Muscovy ducks and painted turtles and fish congregating below a foot-bridge at the wide Elkcam Waterway behind Bayfront hospital.

Further north, in Venice, two big culverts carried slow moving murky water under Bay Indies Boulevard, which empties into Hatchett Creek, which flows in to a wide, ship-going canal that was excavated in the 1960s as part of the Intracoastal Waterway, creating Venice Island.

The lights came on at the old train depot by the Intracoastal where a secu-



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY  
**Above: Billy's Creek runs through Fort Myers. At right: A sugar mill at Canal Point, an unincorporated community next to Lake Okeechobee in Palm Beach County.**



Sugar Mill - Canal Point 12/18/22

rity guard kept watch. A city bus came and went. No one got on, no one got off. The guard still hadn’t quite gotten used to the intense Florida humidity after moving here from Indiana three years ago, but now the air was cooling. He pointed out a pair of osprey nesting on a pole by the depot. One of them will bring back a fish from the canal, he said, and then they fight over the catch. ■

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