

HIPI Environmental Report

May 2026

Objective: To provide our HIPI membership with information on environmental issues that affect our Hutchinson Island Community and its environs.

Indian River Lagoon Economic Value:

The local economic impact of the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) generates \$28.3 Billion annually.

Future Vision for the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon: Looking into the next decade, we can hope for a significant change in the local water quality due to the current initiatives underway. These programs include:

- Sending more water South instead of East into our community.
- A return to water quality that one might have seen in the 1940's and 1950's where oysters and marine life thrived.

What are the initiatives that bring us to a brighter environmental future?

Below is a summary of major projects that are in progress that will reduce Nitrogen, Phosphorus, Pharmaceuticals, Heavy Metals and general Muck.

Latest Updates - IRL

We continue to see significant improvement in the water quality of our local rivers and tributaries. One important metric is the return of "seagrass" in which significant growth is appearing in parts of the IRL. This result is promising and supports the eventual return of significant oysters and other marine species which are limited today due to pollution.

Lake Okechobee Lake Level

Data Ending 2400 hours 20 May 2026 Current Lake level is: 11.37(ft-ngvd), which is a lower level vs. one month ago @ 12.19(ft-ngvd). The USACE is concerned that at this time of year, the level is too low!! They continue to monitor.

US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Update:

EAA Reservoir Project:

The USACE is constructing a reservoir, which will be 10,500-acres with 240,000 acre-feet of storage. The EAA Reservoir Project is a joint Everglades restoration project between the USACE and the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). The project is scheduled for completion in 2028. The construction is on schedule but there could be some State Funding Issues. State funding for the new EAA Reservoir. Legislators continue to wrangle over the [funding for CEPP](#) — the Central Everglades Planning Project which includes the vaunted EAA Reservoir.

As of this writing (18 May, 2026), the Senate is proposing \$424.7 million for the reservoir component of CEPP; the House's current offer is \$249.3 million and is **NOT** resolved at the time of writing this report.

C44 Reservoir: To contain and remove Nitrogen and Phosphorus in *local runoff*. The USACE continues to work on the C44 Reservoir in order to have it fully capable of holding its designed water levels. It is currently operating at 50-60% of its capacity. It was expected to be fully operational sometime in 2026. A recent report from WPTV News indicated it may not be fully operational until 2027. Waiting for latest update from USACE.

Proposed Rock Quarry: Update

Southland Water Resource Project is a controversial, privately proposed 8,600-acre rock mine in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of Lake Okeechobee.

Latest Developments:

- **Restricted Scope:** A settlement reached between environmental groups and the Developers (U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals, and Phillips & Jordan) significantly narrowed the project's current approval. It clarifies that **additional regulatory reviews**—including full water quality and hydrologic impact analyses—are required before any water pumping, discharging, or system connections can occur.
- **South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)** will continue to monitor the planning for the mine to insure quality control on any water discharged from the mining operation. Further comment can be found in the "Project Status & Next Steps Section.

Project Status & Next Steps - Proposed Rock Quarry:

The project is not yet operational, as it still faces several regulatory hurdles:

- **SFWMD Review:** The **South Florida Water Management District** has yet to complete its full evaluation or weigh in on the final connection of the project to the Everglades.
- **Federal Permits:** The **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers** has not yet issued the required **408** (modification of federal works) and **404** (dredge and fill) permits.

St. Lucie Muck Cleanup

There is continuing discussions being reviewed at the Rivers Coalition Meetings addressing the muck in the St. Lucie River. The USACE continues to update their approach and testing of different methods to be considered for the cleanup. More on this project in the next months as a method for cleanup is finalized.

South Florida Water Management: (SFWMD)

More focus on lowering Nitrogen and Phosphorus entering the Lake Okeechobee region continues to be discussed. This is one of the main causes for algae buildup.

Plans for specifically controlling polluted runoff from C24 & C25 canals into the IRL. The project is part of the Indian River Lagoon South Plan. Crews are constructing a canal linking the C-23 Canal to the C-44 Reservoir and its associated Stormwater Treatment Area (STA's), where the water will be cleaned. The water management district says the project will improve water quality in the St. Lucie estuary and help restore a more natural water flow.

The work is part of the Indian River Lagoon–South Restoration Project, led by the South Florida Water Management District in partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

According to SFWMD project documents, the goal is to capture and treat polluted runoff before it reaches the Indian River Lagoon, using new canals, reservoirs, and stormwater treatment areas (STA's) designed to clean water upstream rather than allowing it to flow directly into sensitive waterways.

Martin County

Martin County Forever Land Acquisition Progress:

Key Progress Updates & Focus Areas

- **Bar-B Ranch Easement:** Martin County partnered with the state to permanently protect more than 1,700 acres through a \$17 million conservation easement, safeguarding wildlife habitats and water quality.
- **Potential Acquisitions:** The Environmental Lands Oversight Committee (ELOC) has evaluated and advanced a slate of 16 highly ranked proposed properties for future acquisition, including Whitworth Farms.
- **Hutchinson Island:** The county has targeted and moved toward securing an oceanfront parcel on Hutchinson Island aimed at expanding the existing Clifton S. Perry Beach Preserve.

Primary Target Zones

Funding is restricted to four specific priority areas critical to Martin County's ecology:

1. **Indian River Lagoon South (IRL-S):** Focusing on protecting wetlands and improving water quality.
2. **Pal Mar:** Preserving wetlands and greenways that connect directly to the Loxahatchee River.
3. **Loxa-Lucie:** Creating a continuous green corridor between Atlantic Ridge and Jonathan Dickinson State Parks.
4. **Blueways Program:** Protecting natural waterways and expanding recreational access along the St. Lucie River and the Indian River Lagoon.

For a closer look at the specific properties or to follow the Environmental Lands Oversight Committee (ELOC) recommendations, visit the official [Martin County Forever](#) hub.

Stuart

Stuart is fighting the construction of a Railway Station in Stuart due to high cost and environmental concerns. Brightline further exacerbates the controversy on the possible railway station construction as it is on the edge of bankruptcy according to TC Palm. Who will pay??.....Surprise, the taxpayer!!

Friends of the Everglades Report – Update.

[the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled](#) that permits to build in wetlands should remain in the hands of federal regulators, rather than being transferred to the state of Florida. **(opinion: That is a good thing)**

A new Florida Agricultural Enclave Law 2026 will now allow for housing developments on farmland by allowing to convert agricultural land to residential use. In 2026, a new state law opened a new path. The Agricultural Enclave legislation allows qualifying agricultural land to be certified as an enclave. Once certified, it can support residential development at densities consistent with the surrounding area. The land is effectively treated as if it already sits within the urban service boundary.

We expect further update at the next Rivers Coalition Meeting in May/June on the Status of Florida State laws updated this session.

Other Actions of Interest

The Ocean Conservancy is circulating a sign-on letter supporting robust NOAA funding and is inviting Florida organizations to participate. The letter will be sent to the full Florida congressional delegation. NOAA funding is critical to restoration in the Indian River Lagoon and St. Lucie estuaries, as well as HAB forecasting, weather, tides, fisheries, and Sea Grant. The proposed FY27 budget includes a 32% cut to NOAA

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Environmental Report Disclaimer

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(HIPI The Hutchinson Island Preservation Initiative), July 2025