

HIPI Environmental Report

October 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 from Lake Okeechobee..
- Creating Reservoirs and STA's for the local Martin County/St.Lucie County watershed that empties into the Indian River Lagoon and the St. Lucie River.
- A return to water quality that one might have seen in the 1940's and 1950's where oysters and marine life thrived.

Latest Updates - IRL/ St Lucie River and Treasure Coast

Lake Okeechobee Lake Level

- **Data Ending 2400 hours 25 October 2026** Current Lake level is: 12.50 feet (ft-ngvd), Historical Average for this day (1965–2007): 15.07 ft
- **Total Inflows:** 111 cfs (cubic feet per second)
- **Total Outflows:** 169 cfs [\[1\]](#)

Super El Nino Regional Impact

Rivers Coalition Organization reviewed the effects on our environment due to the “Super El Nino” which is now occurring. They showed data that in 1998, the last El Nino predicted to be very strong, there was a significant amount of rain during the usual “dry” season (December to April). The rainfall amounted to 1.0MM acre/ft vs. a more traditional season of 200 acre/ft. The Lake Okeechobee reservoir was overwhelmed contributing to a significant release of water to St. Lucie River. NOAA is forecasting a higher level of precipitation from December to April for 2026-2027. NOAA is predicting

the range for this upcoming dry season will be 15-38 inches of rain or a mean of 25 inches over the 5 month period. vs a normal rainfall of approx 10-15 inches. Army Corps of Engineers will be need to scrutinize the level of the lake very carefully; probably keeping on the low side in anticipation of more rainfall. The worst scenario could mean a Lake O level of over 18 feet. Discharges to the St. Lucie River would be mandatory over 17 feet.

Riverwatch Conservation Easement Update

10/26- Recently, the Riverwatch POA applied to the FDEP for a permit to change the restriction of no gasoline powered engines allowed to enter the easement to allow for gasoline engines. This rule has been in place since the beginning of the easement decades ago. After years of attempts they made to dredge the conservation easement, they somehow were granted the right to dredge it about a year ago when it was meant to be kept in it's original state in perpetuity. Now, six months after the dredge, the clarity of the Conservation Easement channel has been compromised, and the once flourishing seagrass has been greatly diminished. There are clear violations of power boats accessing the Riverwatch Channel. Enforcement would entail more documentation of violations. A plan is required showing proof of violations. You can make a difference by contacting:

Viviana Useche

Director

Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Southeast District – West Palm Beach

[3301 Gun Club Road](#), MSC 7210-1

West Palm Beach, FL 33406

Viviana.Useche@FloridaDEP.gov

Office: [561.681.6615](tel:561.681.6615)

Please take the time to write to Ms. Useche and stop the Riverwatch POA from destroying this beautiful asset.

Oculina Habitat (being endangered)

The Oculina Habitat of Particular Concern (OHAPC) is under threat again. The current administration's Executive Order 14276 "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness" reinforced earlier measures to expand domestic fishing opportunities and reduce regulatory friction, and it was the impetus for the bottom-trawling rock shrimpers to request access to a portion of this first-of-its-kind Marine Protected Area, where this unique deepwater Oculina coral has resided for centuries.

Florida's marine ecosystems are connected, from deep-water reefs to the inshore waters we enjoy every day.



The Oculina Bank provides important habitat for marine life, including fish that are part of Florida's commercial and recreational fisheries. Many fish species depend on different habitats throughout their life cycles, connecting offshore spawning areas with inshore nursery environments.

These connections matter to recreational anglers, fishing guides, boaters and the coastal communities that depend on healthy marine resources.

That's why decisions about the Oculina Reef deserve a broader perspective. The potential benefits of expanding access for one fishery must be weighed against the possible ecological consequences for a sensitive habitat and the wider marine environment.

Healthy habitats support healthy fisheries.

We encourage NOAA Fisheries to carefully consider the potential impacts of the proposed Coral Amendment 11/Shrimp Amendment 12 and maintain existing protections throughout the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern.

The public comment deadline is November 17, 2026.

Please share this message with a fellow angler, fishing guide or anyone who cares about Florida's coastal waters.

[Submit Your Comments](#)

Thank you for helping protect Florida's coastal and marine resources.

Comments can be made to

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/09/18/2026-19182/coral-coral-reefs-and-livehardbottom-habitats-of-the-south-atlantic-and-the-shrimp-fishery-of-the#open-comment>

Florida Amendment 3 Discussion and Environmental Impact

Summary: The proposed Amendment 3 that will appear on our November ballots would provide a reduction in the property tax of homesteaded home owners. On the surface, the reduction in property tax would be a positive; especially for low and middle income families. But, in fact the amendment has many hidden elements that would hit these families harder than the savings of several hundred dollars per year if the amendment passed. It is noted here that our State Representative, Toby Overdorf is one of the sponsors for this legislation. The future vision of clean water discussed above could be significantly affected if this amendment passes.

NOTE: There is no State Reserve to draw from in order to fill local funding gaps. The loss of funding by local governments, if the Amendment 3 Homestead Exemption passes would force them to go back to the State for funds. The State of Florida would have greater leverage vis-a-vis control of the “purse strings” undermining “local home rule”.

Concerns: Regional State and County Wide Impact

1. South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) which has the authority for our South Florida water control has 30% of its funding coming directly from our Tax Dollars. A significant reduction would occur if this Amendment 3 is passed.
2. The SFWMD is not commenting on what would happen if the Amendment passes and what cutbacks do they see due to State Politics!! Some possible options could be:
 - a. Projects would have to be extended or canceled in order to cover costs e.g. the EAA Reservoir.
 - b. Possible redundancies of personnel.
 - c. Funding of Projects would provide the State with more control and political influence over local government.

Concerns: Martin County Impact

1. Martin County would see a reduction in tax revenue over a 3 year period. In the 3rd year, it is projected that the county would have to find replacement of revenue of \$170MM. How would that be accomplished?? Possible solutions:
 - a. Beaches would require an annual payment for parking
 - b. Libraries would no longer be free
 - c. Parks would have higher fees or would require some type of payment for use.
 - d. Parking in many parts of the county would have to be metered.

- e. Possible fees for Athletic Fields and Youth Sports
- f. Senior Programs would have to be privately funded individually or eliminated.
- g. New funding would be required for “After-school Activities”.
- h. Some Firehouses might need to be closed, according to a recent assessment by our Fire Marshal and the reason they oppose it.
- i. Police funding would be affected. Would our community safety suffer from lower services?? That is why the State Police have opposed the amendment!!
- j. Road improvement and concurrent services would be affected.

Question:

- Would we be safer under Amendment 3?? Would the savings from Amendment 3 actually cost us more due to lack of funding from traditional revenue sources??
- We asked both the County and our State Representative for more detail on examples of exact savings and they have not responded even after extensive follow up with them.

US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Update:

Everglades Agriculture Area including the 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 2029.

NOTE: The bigger question is whether the State of Florida will have the funds to continue its support of key environmental projects if money has to be re-positioned to support local cities loss of income due to Amendment 3??

NOTE: Historically, the State of Florida reduces its support of environmental projects when there is a loss of revenue.

St. Lucie River 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. There are multiple approaches being considered.

Stuart:

The City of Stuart has introduced a new program, SALT (Sustainable Acquisitions of Lands for Tomorrow). This program is similar to the County program, ELOC (Environmental Land Oversight Committee) to identify and buy land to preserve it.

Martin County:

The County reports a new invasive species of seagrass, *Haolphila Stipulacea*, has been observed in our local waterways. The County is looking at treating areas of infestation. Little is known about this seagrass in terms of advantages or disadvantages to allow this seagrass to gain traction in the County waterways. It is not native to our region.

The Guardians of Martin County have hired a consultant to study the pollution cause in the St. Lucie River, South Fork which shows worst pollution within the whole River system. This is pertinent due to the large amount of spawning of Saw Fish.

Paul Laura
HIPI Environmental Director

Environmental Report Disclaimer

Please read this disclaimer carefully before reading our (HIPI) Hutchinson Island Preservation Initiative Environmental Monthly Report .

All information posted is merely for educational and informational purposes. It is not intended as a substitute for professional advice.

While the information herein has been verified to the best of our abilities, we cannot guarantee that there are no mistakes or errors or, that additional information superseding this report may have occurred after this publication.

We reserve the right to change this policy at any given time.

(HIPI The Hutchinson Island Preservation Initiative), July 2025