

HIPi Environmental Report

August 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.

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/ St Lucie River and Treasure Coast

Significant attention was being brought on a dredging project occurring off Sailfish. Point Inlet. Videos have been provided on-line that show what appears to be damage done to the reefs and habitats around the dredge. Dead fish and black muck were being reported.

Based on the information we have received from a June 2026 Martin County Commissioners' meeting, there will be a review of the current dredging methods used and changes to future dredging limiting environmental damage to the local reef at Bathtub Beach.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Authority have proposed changes to local shark fishing. The changes in regulations could have significant effect on the safety of

our residents who use the beach for recreation. Please see below under Martin County the latest discussion.

The Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management have announced an agreement that will ensure Federal and State Funds will be available for completion of key projects to improve the water quality of the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and local water quality projects e.g. C23/C24 canals, C44 Reservoir that capture rainfall runoff for Martin and St. Lucie Counties. See more details below.

Lake Okeechobee Lake Level

Data Ending 2400 hours 8 AUGUST 2026 Current Lake level is: 10.98 (ft-ngvd), The average level this time of year is 12-15(ft-ngvd). The USACE is concerned that the level is too low!! They continue to monitor.

Florida Environmental Budget Update

Florida lawmakers approved an **\$114.5 billion** state budget that includes \$8.9 billion for the agriculture and environment sectors. The spending plan directs major investments toward Everglades restoration and land easements, while significantly reducing traditional state environmental programming.

Shifts and Reductions

While Agricultural and Everglades preservation received large injections of capital, traditional state conservation programs saw major pullbacks:

- **Florida Forever:** The state's premier land conservation program received no new funding in the finalized budget, and legacy funds were swept into agricultural easements. **The Legislature's Land Conservation Budget is a Broken Promise to Floridians**
- **General DEP Budget:** **Overall spending for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEPA) experienced significant cuts compared to previous years.**

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.

UPDATE: July 2026, The South Florida Water Management District and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers signed a first-of-a-kind agreement to advance construction of key Everglades restoration projects in South Florida. This agreement ensures federal funding will go to the State of Florida for key projects that will line up with the completion of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2029.

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.

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.

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 (USACE)** has not yet issued required permits.

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.

NOTE: The South Florida Water Management Group recently discussed a method of cleanup using a vacuum type approach.

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. There was recently review of the status on meeting projected Phosphorus and Nitrogen Levels in Lake Okeechobee and its environs. The state is still far from meeting stated goals

To summarize, the actual Phosphorus and Nitrogen levels continue to be much higher than stated objectives. Politics play a key role in not meeting the planned objectives.

FORT PIERCE, Fla.- (July 30, 2026) -The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Jacksonville District and the South Florida Water Management District, (SFWMD) celebrated the completion of construction on the Indian River Lagoon-South (IRL-South) C-23/C-24 Stormwater Treatment (STA's) Restoration Project:

- Provide valuable open water, wetland, and upland habitat, Include thousands of acre-feet of new water storage,
- Divert excess water from the local basins, helping to rehydrate the floodplain of the north fork of the St. Lucie River
- Moderate flows to the estuary to allow maintaining increased salinity levels during heavy rainfall..
- To reduce the nutrients going to the St. Lucie River Estuary and the southern portion of the Indian River Lagoon and limit algae growth.

Martin County

Martin County Forever Land Acquisition Progress:

Primary Target Zones NOTE: Funding is currently 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.

Florida Fish and Wildlife Authority Proposed Regulation Change

Shark Fishing

Florida Fish and Wildlife has proposed to repeal portions of an ordinance that protect residents from “chumming” and other shark-fishing activities on public beaches. This proposal was reviewed by the Martin County Commissioners and they recommended more review was required. Members of HIPI attended the meeting and indicated their strong concerns for any relaxing of Shark Fishing Regulations indicating a stronger, not weaker ordinance is required. It was noted that the original proposal does not cite the recent use of drones being used for Shark Fishing nor the implications of increased potential of number of sharks looking for food near the shoreline and its impact on local beaches.

NOTE: State law does not prevent local governments from banning activities on beaches which threaten public health, safety or welfare. The law allows local governments to prohibit saltwater fishing from government-owned property for those reasons.

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.

Nothing to report this month for Martin County.

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

Notice of Strong Concern: Batlike sea hares invade beaches to mate; toxic ink can kill your dog. If you take your dog to a Florida beach in spring and summer, you should be cautious of toxic sea hares that invade shallow and nearshore waters to mate.

Batlike sea hares are large marine sea slugs that ripple their flap-like side-appendages (parapodia) to look as if they are "flying" underwater.



Paul Laura

HIPi Environmental Director,

August' 2026

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(HIPi The Hutchinson Island Preservation Initiative), July 2025