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HARMFUL ALGAE BLOOMS ON THE RISE IN FLORIDA WATERS - 15-Fold Increase Tied to Pollution

Tallahassee - Human pollution is driving a dramatic increase in the number, size and duration of harmful algal blooms in Florida's lakes, estuaries and coastal waters, according to documents released today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

Algae are a natural part of virtually all aquatic ecosystems. When an algae population accelerates or explodes, it is called a bloom. An algal bloom can last anywhere from a few days to a few months, depending on conditions. The dying algae bacteria often release toxins that cause liver and nerve damage. Algal bloom toxins are linked to auto-immune disorders in mammals, from manatees to humans.

While a worldwide phenomena, Florida is the undisputed capital of algal blooms. Of the 100 known species of what are called Harmful Algal Blooms, where the bloom kills or damages aquatic life, 70 are indigenous to Florida with 50 marine/estuarine varieties and 20 freshwater species.

In recent years, Harmful Algal Blooms have been on the rise in Florida's marine and fresh waters, according to scientific presentations at the Southwest Florida Symposium, sponsored this July by the Council of Civic Associations:

- * Red tides, a form of marine algae blooms, have grown 15-fold since the 1950's in the coastal waters of Southwest Florida;
- * The duration and intensity of Harmful Algal Blooms are increasing; and
- * The growing scientific consensus is that pollution is the trigger for these larger, more long-lasting and more toxic episodes.

"From Tampa to the Bay of Biscayne, algal blooms have driven tourists, fishermen and residents out of inland and coastal waters in record numbers," stated Florida PEER Director Jerry Phillips, a former water enforcement attorney with the state Department of Environmental Protection. "These algal blooms are the chickens coming home to roost for decades of an utterly broken state water quality program."

According to government reports, Harmful Algal Blooms have lingered in Florida's waters since mid-May. During the past few months, whole sections of the state's coast, as well as rivers and lakes, have been off-limits for human contact. The state's shellfish industry has been crippled by contamination. Recreational fishing has been hurt by massive fish kills. The algal blooms have become most acute along the southwest coast of Florida which has seen its population grow nearly 50-fold in recent decades.

Despite a growing scientific consensus that Harmful Algal Blooms are triggered by pollution, state agencies are stoutly denying any connection, blaming hurricanes and weather cycles, rather than rising

nutrient levels in waters discharged into sensitive estuaries.

"Florida's public health and environmental response to algal blooms has been directed by a Chamber of Commerce mentality in which these outbreaks are portrayed as short-lived weather-driven phenomena rather than as a product of pollution run amuck," Phillips added. "The regular and rising diversion of Lake Okeechobee's filthy waters into our estuaries is a giant algal bloom factory operating full tilt in the heart of the state."