

FLORIDA GETS SLIMED

Since May, Florida's Lake Okeechobee has been fouled by slimy green slurry visible from space. Outbreaks of blue-green algae are a worsening problem because years of agricultural pollution—and lack of political will to rein it in—have turned the lake into what one attorney called a “toilet.” The ecological disaster in “Lake O” is devastating people and wildlife across South Florida.

Earthjustice is fighting to limit pollution in the lake and enforce water quality standards in surrounding rivers. We're also challenging “backpumping,” when agricultural operations take water from the lake, irrigate fields, then pump the water back into the lake full of fertilizer and pesticides.

1 BIG AG

For decades, big sugar cane, vegetable, beef and dairy producers have dumped tons of fertilizer and manure into Lake Okeechobee. This phosphorus and nitrogen pollution, along with warm weather and ample rain, has created a breeding ground in the lake for outbreaks of blue-green algae.

2 THE BIG FLUSH

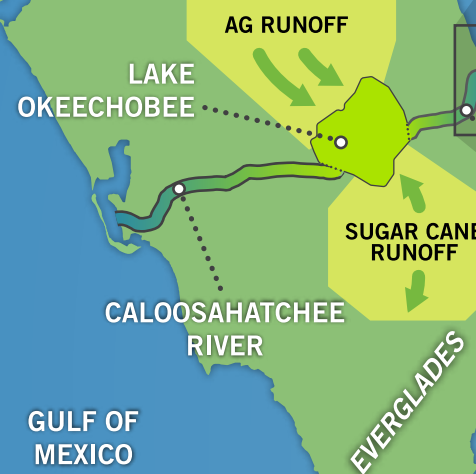
When the lake fills with too much rain and runoff, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers opens the aging floodgates on the lake and “flushes” billions of gallons of water through the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers to the coasts—algae, pollutants and all.

3 ECOSYSTEMS UNRAVEL

As algae-infested, nutrient-laden water reaches the estuaries and coastline, it decimates fish, shellfish, dolphins and manatees. The algae release toxins and are so prolific they block sunlight and oxygen from reaching animals and sea grasses below the water's surface.

4 TOXIC TIDES

The algae eruption has ravaged a region renowned for tourism and water sports. The foul-smelling algae can cause rashes, vomiting and liver damage if humans touch, drink or inhale them.



1938

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes a dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee and dredges canals into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers to prevent flooding.

1950

Beef and dairy cattle populations in Central Florida skyrocket 700 percent from 1925 to 1950, increasing polluted runoff into the lake.

1998

Earthjustice files a lawsuit, settled in 1999, requiring Florida to set limits on pollution in natural bodies of water like Lake O.

2002

Earthjustice sues the South Florida Water Management District for backpumping agribusinesses' polluted water into Lake O.

2008

Earthjustice sues the EPA to set numeric limits on phosphorus and nitrogen in Florida's inland waterways. The EPA finalizes the limits in 2012.

2014

A judge rules in Earthjustice's favor, affirming that water transfers like backpumping are inconsistent with the Clean Water Act. The case is now on appeal.

2016

In January, Gov. Rick Scott signs a bill to delay Lake O cleanup and allow polluters to monitor themselves. In June, Scott declares a state of emergency when toxic algae engulf the lake and surrounding waters.