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CONTACT: DEP Press Office, 850.245.2112, DEPNews@dep.state.fl.us

DEP, FWC, DOH AND SFWMD WORKING TOGETHER IN THE ST. LUCIE BASIN

~Efforts must balance flood control, navigation, water supply, water quality and the overall ecological health of waterbodies ~

TALLAHASSEE – The Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Department of Health and South Florida Water Management District are working together to address the complex environmental and public health issues affecting the St. Lucie River and Estuary, Indian River Lagoon and Lake Okeechobee. The agencies, along with other state and local partners are investing hundreds of millions of dollars to balance flood control, navigation, water supply, water quality and the overall ecological health of these waterbodies.

DEP continues its restoration efforts for the [treasure coast](#). In July, the Department announced the adoption of the first restoration plan for the St. Lucie River and Estuary with local governments already investing \$230 million to address stormwater runoff in particular. Under Governor Scott's leadership, the Department also set the first restoration roadmap for the Indian River Lagoon. The three restoration plans for the Lagoon account for more than \$300 million invested or to be invested in restoration projects. Stakeholders in the area have completed or will complete hundreds of projects over the next five years.

"These restoration plans and collaborative commitments illustrate what can be accomplished when the state invests wisely to support and supplement Department and water management district restoration programs," said Department Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr. "Much more needs to be done, but these projects can pave the way to restoration while we continue to gather the data and information needed to guide future efforts."

With Lake Okeechobee's water level continuing to rise from months of above-average rainfall, the [South Florida Water Management District](#) is taking action to capture and store water throughout the flood control system. In addition to using regional public projects to store excess water, the District is working with property owners to retain water on their land rather than drain it, to accept and detain regional runoff, or do both. Holding water on these lands is one tool to help reduce the amount of water flowing into Lake Okeechobee and/or discharged to the St. Lucie Estuary during the current

high water conditions throughout South Florida.

The recent development of an algal bloom in the St. Lucie Estuary has highlighted the complexity and unique challenges these ecosystems present. South Florida Water Management District meteorologists report the wettest April through July period on record in South Florida since 1932. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which manages the level of Lake Okeechobee with input from stakeholders including the District, has been making regulatory releases. The heavy influx of fresh water into the St. Lucie basin at this time of year is a primary reason for the type of bloom currently occurring over a significant segment of the estuary.

DEP deployed staff to sample the algae and current water quality conditions in three locations in the St. Lucie basin last week. Initial tests confirmed a bloom of potential toxin-producing cyanobacteria. DEP's laboratory in Tallahassee conducted additional analyses of the samples. The results received Tuesday confirmed the presence of microcystin (toxin). These results have been shared with the Department of Health and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. This data, along with different types of investigations by the Department of Health and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, will inform both short- and long-term strategies to protect public health and the environment.

The area remains under a precautionary advisory by the Department of Health in Martin County and residents are encouraged to follow that guidance and stay advised to any current advisory conditions.

"People need to know that they can become sick or experience respiratory problems from swimming in or coming in contact with the affected waters," said State Surgeon General and Secretary of Health Dr. John Armstrong. "Floridians should listen closely to local health advisories to keep their families safe."

In addition, DOH officials urge people to not allow their pets to swim or drink in or near algae blooms. Avoid eating fish harvested from areas near or in the blooms. Some people who are very sensitive to the algae may develop a rash. If you do come in contact with affected waters, wash with soap and water right away. As always, if you experience an illness, please see your health care provider immediately.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission's Research Institute is continuing regular monitoring of fish and wildlife in the area and working with our state and federal partners to gather and analyze current data. Fish kills can occur due to low dissolved oxygen in the water, which can be caused by algal blooms, as well as high temperatures and extended periods of cloudy, rainy weather. Although cyanobacteria blooms can occur at any time of year, they usually take place during summer or early fall. They are influenced by light, nutrients, and temperature.

"This is a complex issue that involves several eco-systems and the unprecedented amounts of rain in the last several months," said Nick Wiley, Executive Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. "We encourage the public to help our efforts to better understand this situation by adding to our surveillance capacity and reporting fish kills and injured or sick wildlife".

To report a fish kill or abnormally behaving fish, call the FWC's Fish Kill Hotline at 800-

636-0511 or submit a report online at MyFWC.com/FishKill. Report sick, injured or dead wildlife including manatees and sea turtles to the Wildlife Alert hotline at 888-404-3922.

You can find additional information on health effects related to algae at www.floridashealth.com.

For more information about the water quality protection and restoration programs visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/water/watersheds/bmap.htm>.

About the Florida Department of Environmental Protection

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is the state's principal environmental agency, created to protect, conserve and manage Florida's environment and natural resources. The Department enforces federal and state environmental laws, protects Florida's air and water quality, cleans up pollution, regulates solid waste management, promotes pollution prevention and acquires environmentally-sensitive lands for preservation. The agency also maintains a statewide system of parks, trails and aquatic preserves. To view the Department's website log on to www.dep.state.fl.us.

<http://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/FLDEP/bulletins/865192>