

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 26, 2021

The Honorable Richard Spinrad
Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Administrator Spinrad:

We write to respectfully request that you take urgent action in support of ongoing efforts to improve the ecology of Florida's Indian River Lagoon estuary. Urgent action is required to improve water quality and prevent algal blooms to break the estuary's ongoing cycle of ecological decline.

The Indian River Lagoon is one of the most unique and biologically diverse ecosystems in the United States. The estuary makes up nearly 40 percent of Florida's Atlantic coast, and is home to more than 4,000 plant and animal species, including our state's beloved gentle giant, the West Indian manatee. Sadly, the Indian River Lagoon is ground zero for one of the worst mass mortality events to ever affect manatees in Florida. As of July 2, 2021, just half-way through the calendar year, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has reported 841 manatee mortalities, which is the most ever recorded in a single year. Of these mortalities, 435 occurred in the Indian River Lagoon, likely due to starvation as the result of a shortage of available food resources. We welcome the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's designation of these events as an "unusual mortality event," but more must be done.

In recent years, seagrass coverage within the Indian River Lagoon ecosystem has severely declined due to algal blooms that obstruct water clarity and prevent sunlight from reaching seagrass beds. In 2019, the Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program reported in its updated Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP) that the lagoon had lost an estimated 52 percent of its seagrasses since 2009, and attributed the decline to poor water clarity and recurring algal blooms. More recently, additional seagrass die-offs have occurred as a result of algal blooms and poor water quality. These die-offs can lead to cyclical impacts, as dead seagrasses can block sunlight and contribute to subsequent algal bloom and hypoxia events, killing more seagrasses and wildlife such as manatees.

The Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Research and Control Act authorizes you to designate severe harmful algal blooms and hypoxia events as "Hypoxia or Harmful Algal Blooms of National Significance," and make federal assistance funds available to mitigate the root causes of the algal blooms and hypoxia. We believe that the deaths of hundreds of federally-designated West Indian manatees pose a severe enough situation to warrant such a designation, especially because these deaths have ultimately been caused by the impacts of hypoxia and algal blooms that have decimated the species' main food source within the Indian River Lagoon. Additionally, we urge you to coordinate with the State of Florida on water quality and seagrass restoration projects that are already being planned and implemented to prevent algal

blooms in the Indian River Lagoon, and to consult with the Indian River Lagoon National Estuary Program in identifying priority areas for remediation.

Addressing the root causes of algal blooms and hypoxia is necessary to prevent the deaths of manatees and other wildlife in the future. Improving ecological conditions within the Indian River Lagoon by improving water quality, preventing harmful algal blooms, and planting new seagrasses should all be priority actions to achieve these goals. We respectfully urge you to designate the conditions within the Indian River Lagoon as a Hypoxia or Harmful Algal Bloom of National Significance in order to help achieve these goals and support our irreplaceable wildlife.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator



Brian Mast
Member of Congress



Michael Waltz
Member of Congress



Maria Elvira Salazar
Member of Congress



Carlos Gimenez
Member of Congress



Stephanie Murphy
Member of Congress



Bill Posey
Member of Congress



John Rutherford
Member of Congress



Darren Soto
Member of Congress



Al Lawson
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress