

County celebrates water quality month

By Hector Flores

August is Water Quality Month. While there are many days, weeks and months designated for numerous worthwhile causes, none is more vital than the availability of clean water. Charlotte County is committed to making the most of the relatively small amount of fresh water we have, because having clean water is crucial to our individual health, our agricultural needs, and our environment.

The county has adopted a variation of the U.S. Water Alliance's One Water concept, which is based on the idea that "water in all its forms has value — water in our lakes, seas, rivers and streams, drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater — the full water lifecycle can be optimized to build strong economies, vibrant communities, and healthy environments."

Here we call it One Charlotte, One Water. The County Commission approved the hiring of a water quality manager to develop a water quality monitoring plan and to coordinate cross-departmental efforts and public outreach. Earlier this year, the county convened a water quality summit to identify water quality drivers in Charlotte Harbor; share recent advances in harmful algal bloom detection, prediction and communication; highlight county activities and partnerships to monitor, improve, and protect water quality and natural habitats; and provide opportunities for citizen education and action.

A half-dozen county departments have a direct stake in water quality. Our Utility Department serves more than 60,000 customers with water, wastewater collection and treatment, and reclaimed water for irrigation. The department also manages the county's septic-to-sewer program that aims to remove tens of thousands of septic systems contaminating of our waterways with nitrogen, phosphorus and even prescription medicines.

Our Public Works Department maintains a countywide stormwater drainage system, maintains marine navigation markers and manages aquatic weeds. Our Community Services Department manages beaches, boat ramps, parks and preserves, along with assisting partner agencies to remove derelict vessels from local waterways.

The Community Development Department manages the county's comprehensive plan, which includes coastal planning and natural resource elements that guide county policies on residential and commercial development. It also manages the county's floodplain policies, including the Community Rating System that determines how much property owners save on flood insurance based on the county's implementation of best practices in flood awareness, prevention and mitigation.

Our Public Safety Department has a hazardous materials team that responds to spills to collect and contain them before they can cause damage to the surrounding environment. The department also has a marine unit that responds to boating emergencies.

Our Tourism Department markets the county to visitors worldwide and partners with the local hospitality industry, which generates more than 10,000 jobs and an economic impact of nearly \$1 billion. Tax revenue generated by visitors reduces each household's tax liability by an average of more than \$700 a year. What is the Tourism Department selling? Sun and water.

How can you do your part to improve water quality?

1. Wash your car at a car wash, which saves water and prevents toxic chemicals from being flushed down your storm drains. Water from commercial car washes goes into the sewer system where it is treated.
2. Pick up after your pet. Pet waste is a source of nitrogen, which washes into our waterways with stormwater.
3. Don't use fertilizer made with phosphorus. Remember, the county's fertilizer ban is in effect through Sept. 30.
4. Do not flush medications down the toilet.
5. Take used oil or antifreeze to a service station or recycling center. The county has two drop-off locations. For details, call 941-764-4360.
6. Avoid using antibacterial soaps or cleaning products in your drain as they are also toxic to marine life.
7. Use a rain barrel to collect rainwater. You can purchase one at the Charlotte County Extension Service at Centennial Park, 1120 Centennial Blvd., in Port Charlotte.

We all have a role in ensuring water quality. You do yours. We'll keep doing ours.

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