

Experts: Charlotte Harbor waterways heavily 'impaired'

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PUNTA GORDA — A healthy seagrass population means healthier water, local water agency representatives said during a recent presentation in Punta Gorda on water quality.

Charlotte County Water Quality Manager Brandon Moody and Nicole Iadevaia, of Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership, both emphasized the fact during the presentation organized by TEAM Punta Gorda and the Punta Gorda Isles Civic Association.

"In the past, seagrass acreage throughout Charlotte Harbor (was) up to 16,000 acres, which is massive and wonderful," Iadevaia said during the meeting at the PGICA building Thursday.

"It was relatively stable in the past," she added. "After Hurricane Irma, however, seagrass declined between 2018 and 2020."

CHNEP data showed that seagrass acreage measured only around 13,000 acres in 2020.

"We still have a lot of seagrass, but we did lose a lot (and) we didn't bounce back as quickly," Iadevaia said. "There are a lot of places (in Charlotte County) that have been deemed impaired for nutrients."

When the Florida Department of Environmental Protection receives water quality monitoring information, they assess that information to decide if there is an excess of nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorous or bacteria.

If those nutrients are found to be in excess, then the waterway goes on an impairment list.

"We know that the main estuary (of Charlotte Harbor) is impaired with nutrients — nitrogen, fecal

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bacteria, iron and mercury,” she said. “There are some increasing impairments in the area.

“Our data is telling us that there are decreases in seagrass and increases in algae.”

Iadevaia said that in 2018 the Conservancy of Southwest Florida rated Charlotte Harbor a C-plus.

Water quality ratings are based on the seagrass measurement, Moody said.

“The story behind the numbers that are used to determine impairments ... It’s not that the FDEP just picked a number out of thin air,” he said.

“Where it actually came from was a study conducted in 2011,” Moody said. “The study was commissioned by some of the groups (like CHNEP) within the Charlotte Harbor area to try to figure out what the appropriate limits of nutrients and chlorophyll would be.” Those groups then had discussions and decided seagrass growth was the indicator, he said.

“When we had healthy seagrass populations what was the water quality during that period of time?” Moody said. “If the water quality was of this level when we had healthy sea grass populations than that must be where we need to keep things to maintain healthy sea grass populations.”

Another words, he said the water quality criteria for nutrients in Charlotte Harbor is based on the idea that “if we maintain those nutrients, we will maintain healthy seagrass.”

“We’ve got a lot of areas considered impaired,” he added.

But there is a light at the end of the tunnel, both representatives said, as monitoring continues and Charlotte County and local organizations implement more programs to protect the area waterways.

“Charlotte County’s septic to sewer conversion has been going on many years now,” Moody said. “Monitoring is being conducted by Western Michigan University to see how nutrients have dropped in areas where conversions have occurred.”

Another move by county commissioners to clean up area water bodies is a push for advanced treatment at water reclamation facilities.

Advanced wastewater treatment, or AWT, goes beyond the standard treatment for reclaimed water, to remove nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus, as well as other organic compounds.

Moody said advanced treatment is planned to go in at both the East Port Water Reclamation Facility at 3100 Loveland Blvd. in Port Charlotte, and the Burnt Store Water Reclamation Facility at 17430 Burnt Store Road in Punta Gorda.

“Those two facilities are about to undergo major expansion due to population growth,” Moody said. “As part of that, commissioners have approved adding advanced treatment to those.”

Moody said construction at those facilities could start next year or the year after.

To find out more information about water quality in the area, as well as ways to get involved, go to CharlotteCountyFL.gov/one-charlotte-one-water.

More information about CHNEP and its programs can be found at CHNEP.org.

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