



Project POND

Red tide non-profit to help neighborhoods enhance water quality

Anne Snabes Sarasota Herald-Tribune
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A new program plans to help Sarasota County neighborhoods upgrade their drainage ponds so they can better filter nutrients that can feed red tide.

The local nonprofit START, or Solutions to Avoid Red Tide, launched the program at a Wednesday press conference overlooking the blue water of the bay. The program is known as a regional Healthy Ponds Collaborative, and most of its funding is coming from a \$250,000 grant from the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation.

Stormwater flows from neighborhood stormwater holding ponds to other retention areas, creeks or rivers and

See PONDS, Page 6B



Abbey Tyrna, the water resources agent for UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County, talks about the Healthy Ponds Collaborative and the benefits of adding aquatic plants to ponds at a Wednesday press conference.

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TOP: Plants in and along stormwater ponds can help absorb excess nutrients, reducing pollution and potentially red tide outbreaks.

PROVIDED BY MICHELLE ATKINSON, UF/IFAS EXTENSION IN MANATEE COUNTY



A stormwater retention pond in Palmer Ranch. Stormwater retention ponds are used to capture rain runoff and filter nutrients that would otherwise flow toward area bays and the Gulf of Mexico. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE

Ponds

Continued from Page 1B

eventually reaches Sarasota Bay. That stormwater is responsible for 65% of the nitrogen in Sarasota Bay, according to START. *Karenia Brevis*, the algae responsible for red tide in Florida, feeds on chemicals like nitrogen.

Ponds are one way to reduce the amount of these chemicals going into the bay, as they filter stormwater. However, the ponds in Sarasota County only operate at 40-60% efficiency in removing the nutrients that contribute to water pollution, according to a Barancik Foundation press release.

The Healthy Ponds Collaborative will help neighborhoods upgrade their ponds. The collaborative will provide neighborhood groups with expert consultants who can advise them on how to improve their ponds, and it will also pay for some of the cost of those improvements, according to Teri Hansen, the president and CEO of the Barancik Foundation.

The program will advise neighborhood groups to plant certain kinds of aquatic plants in their ponds. These plants take in nutrients like nitrogen, thus making the water cleaner.

"If we can put more plants in, we can take up more nitrogen and phosphorus," said Abbey Tyrna, the water resources agent for UF/IFAS Extension

Sarasota County, at the press conference.

The Healthy Ponds Collaborative will also make other recommendations to homeowners and homeowner associations, including reducing the amount of fertilizer, grass clippings and pet feces going into their ponds.

The Barancik Foundation grant will also be used to create new educational materials, including a best management practices manual for ponds and a media kit.

Sandy Gilbert, START's chairman, said making these kinds of improvements will save homeowners money in the long run. If a neighborhood does not maintain its pond and its bank erodes too much, the homeowners may have to install costly technologies to fix the problem.

START has already been working with neighborhoods on improving their ponds, and Gilbert says the financial factor convinces homeowner association boards to sign onto the program.

"I have to admit it is money that drives a board to commit to this program," he said.

The red tide outbreak that lingered along Florida's west coast from Tampa Bay to Fort Myers for much of the summer finally waned in recent weeks.

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