

START Expands Healthy Ponds Collaborative

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By [Scene](#) |

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Building on a successful program that helped more than two dozen Sarasota County communities bolster (and beautify) their stormwater retention ponds, Solutions to Avoid Red Tide (START) has secured a \$100,000 grant from Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation to expand a regional “Healthy Pond Collaborative” (HPC) initiative into Manatee County.

The Manatee version will be a partnership with START and the Manatee County Department of Parks and Natural Resources that will in combination with the Sarasota County effort now cover all ponds flowing into the Sarasota Bay Watershed. This is a major step forward in the attempt to reduce the flow of excess nutrients in stormwater into our waterways that lower water clarity needed to restore the health of our seagrass beds and feed harmful algal blooms like red tide.

According to START, stormwater contributes 65% of the nitrogen into local waterways, which feeds red tide and causes other damage to water quality and wildlife. You may call them lakes, but the more than 6,000 bodies of water in Sarasota County are all manmade and only operate at 40% to 60% efficiency in removing the excess nutrients that contribute to water pollution.

This new collaboration will help more neighborhoods upgrade their ponds and cost-share the improvements. It also will create and distribute a step-by-step pond enhancement guide, host educational focus groups, and do follow-up monitoring of pond enhancements. A very successful pilot pond program funded by a grant from philanthropists Ed Chiles and Elizabeth Moore helped enhance over a half-mile of pond shoreline in Manatee County communities last year.

This unique effort and collaboration is helping to establish state-wide and national models that can be recreated in other communities.

The Numbers

There are more than 10,000 ponds in Sarasota and Manatee counties. Of these, the majority are classified as wet detention ponds. These water bodies temporarily store water before releasing it downstream by canals, ditches, and pipes to federal- and state-regulated waters. All the creeks and bayous that drain into the bays of Sarasota and Manatee counties have too much pollution to meet water quality standards.

The Symptoms

Three of the most common symptoms of unbalanced ponds are: the loss of land associated with pond erosion; frequent algal blooms; and the loss of once abundant wildlife.

Historic Treatment

Over the past several decades, pond management has often been reduced to monthly chemical applications to kill undesirable aquatic plants and algae living in and around the ponds. This heavy reliance on pesticides to manage stormwater ponds led professionals to ask: are we poisoning our ponds and subsequently our downstream waters in order to enhance our view?

Healthy Pond Collaborative Solutions

The HPC utilizes better practices to treat ponds and educate homeowners and associations on how they can maintain their ponds in the future. A holistic approach includes reducing inputs (like herbicides, fertilizer, plant and lawn clippings, and domestic animal fecal matter) and building up natural defenses (like native plants and fish). The collaborative also restores or enhances ponds' littoral zones with native wetland plants. A low-maintenance buffer around the perimeter of a pond can also secure the bank and allow for some additional removal of nutrients and other non-point source pollution before entering the pond.

New educational materials will be developed including a unique best management practices manual to show communities how to improve and manage their ponds and a media kit to help leaders boost awareness of the need to improve pond health.

These actions are activities inspired by Gulf Coast Community Foundation's *Community Playbook for Healthy Waterways* (<https://www.waterqualityplaybook.org>)

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