

# PRESS RELEASE



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## **River Report Card Raises Water Quality Red Flags: Elevated Levels of Pollution and Saltwater Intrusion Cause for Alarm**

**Jacksonville, FL** - The 12<sup>th</sup> Annual State of the River Report for the Lower St. Johns River Basin shows a striking jump in phosphorus, elevated levels of metals, continued loss of wetlands, and increasing impacts from saltwater intrusion and sea level rise. Each of these indicators serve as ecological red flags that require immediate attention.

The Report not only indicates an increase in phosphorous levels that are fueling frequent blue-green algae outbreaks, but also shows that sea level rise from climate change and a legacy of dredging are causing salinity to rise and saltwater to move further upriver. This saltwater intrusion has “potential negative impacts on submerged aquatic vegetation,” undermining the river’s ability to filter out excess pollution and provide habitat for numerous aquatic organisms.

At the same time, South Florida is transporting its sewage sludge, a byproduct of wastewater treatment, to the headwaters region of the St. Johns for disposal on farm and ranch lands. Sewage sludge contains high levels of phosphorus as well as a host of metals not removed in the treatment process. Since our river flows north, excess pollution in our headwaters will eventually reach north Florida. Without immediate action to stop sewage sludge (also known as Biosolids) from being dumped in our watershed, we face a future of algal blooms and impacts to human and ecosystem health.

Chief Scientist for the 2019 State of the River Report Gerry Pinto says “there are *early indicators* that phosphorus is rising. While the Report Card focuses on 5-year trends, we do see an uptick in phosphorus and that is concerning for the Lower St. Johns.”

Here are some findings from the 2019 River Report:

- Total Nitrogen and Phosphorus levels remain unsatisfactory, exceeding state water quality standards. An abrupt uptick in Phosphorous occurred in 2018.
- Metals, including Arsenic, Cadmium, Lead, Silver, and Mercury show elevated levels and a unique pattern from 2016-2018, previously a downward trend.
- Sea Level Rise is increasing groundwater levels. This reduces the capacity of the ground to hold and store nutrients and rainfall, resulting in more runoff, leaching and pollution.
- Saltwater Intrusion is damaging wetlands and submerged vegetation that are critical to the river’s health.
- Wetland losses continue, due to increased land development.
- Submerged vegetation destabilized by drought and back-to-back hurricanes has seen limited recovery.

Lisa Rinaman, the St. Johns Riverkeeper, “Florida must prioritize a comprehensive statewide solution to deal with human waste. While the state is growing by 900 people a day, Florida must have a sustainable plan to dispose of human waste without polluting our waterways or threatening human health.”

Stephanie Freeman, Chair of the St. Johns Riverkeeper Water Policy Group says “as a Mom, I am most concerned about the increase in metals being detected in our waterways. This newly released report makes me not only fear for the health of our river but the exposure to our children. As a family that fishes, boats and kayaks with my kids, I want my children to be able to enjoy our waterways without worrying about the harmful effects of metals, especially lead, in our waters.”

“This Report underscores the fact that for Florida to be truly resilient to the growing threat of sea level rise, we have to make better decisions to offset impacts. We must protect wetlands, deny permits that accelerate impacts, and fortify our river for future generations,” Rinaman said.

Visit [www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org](http://www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org) and sign the petition asking for the same protections as South Florida to protect water quality in the St. Johns River from sewage sludge. To date, more than 13,000 people have signed the petition.

*St. Johns RIVERKEEPER, Inc. is a member-supported, nonprofit advocacy organization.  
Our mission is to defend the St. Johns River and advocate for its protection.  
Visit [www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org](http://www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org) to take action.*