

Introduction

The South Florida Clean Coastal Waters Act amends the Harmful Algal Bloom and Hypoxia Reduction and Control Act of 1998 (HABHRCA) and requires the Interagency Working Group on HABHRCA (IWG-HABHRCA) to conduct and deliver an interim integrated assessment to Congress and the White House by November 2023. This interim assessment is to examine the causes and consequences of harmful algal blooms (HABs) and hypoxia, and potential approaches to reduce their prevalence in South Florida. A full integrated assessment and action plan will follow from this effort in 2025. Currently, the IWG-HABHRCA is seeking information from key groups in South Florida to ensure that the interim assessment is accurate, non-duplicative, and inclusive of ongoing efforts by State, local, and tribal governments as well as non-governmental and academic groups.

Background

HABs and hypoxia – the overgrowth of algae/cyanobacteria and often related severe oxygen depletion – are some of the most scientifically complex and economically damaging issues challenging our ability to safeguard the health of our nation’s waters. In South Florida, HABs and their associated toxins are observed in lakes, rivers, estuaries, and coastal areas. These HABs proliferate when environmental conditions (e.g., winds, temperatures, currents, excess nutrients) are favorable, and can result in significant impacts to human and environmental health as well as local economies.

Federal efforts to address HABs and hypoxia began with the passage of HABHRCA in 1998. The HABHRCA established the IWG, an interagency task force with now upwards of twenty member agencies, co-chaired by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The original law initiated a national assessment of HABs and hypoxia and authorized funding for relevant research. Subsequent reauthorizations of the law directed the IWG to develop regular reporting to Congress and conduct a number of regional science assessments (e.g., Gulf of Mexico, Great Lakes).

The South Florida Clean Coastal Waters Act of 2021 enhances efforts by the IWG-HABHRCA in South Florida and requires the development of a plan (due Dec 2025) for reducing, mitigating, and controlling HABs and hypoxia in the region. The statute defines South Florida as, “all lands and waters of the South Florida Management District” and regional coastal waters, including, “Biscayne Bay, the Caloosahatchee Estuary, Florida Bay, Indian River Lagoon, St. Lucie River Estuary, and the Florida Reef Tract.” This plan must address monitoring needs, identify requirements for the development of HAB and hypoxia models, and propose the implementation of an early warning system for alerting local communities in the region to harmful algal bloom risks that may impact human health.

The act requires the IWG-HABHRCA to complete an integrated assessment (due June 2025) to address the status of, and gaps within, current HAB and hypoxia research, monitoring, management, prevention, response, and control activities that directly affect the region. The first step in this process is to conduct an interim integrated assessment (due Nov 2023) to examine the causes and consequences of HABs and hypoxia in South Florida, and potential approaches for their reduction. This interim assessment will represent a synthesis of ongoing efforts and will serve to guide the full integrated assessment.

Request for Information

The IWG-HABHRCA is requesting information from key groups to include in the interim assessment and ensure that this effort is sound and efficient. Coordination of information exchange will occur throughout 2023, and planning is underway for multiple opportunities for engagement, both in-person and virtual. The assessment team looks forward to working hand-in-hand with South Florida organizations towards the shared goal of improving water quality and enhancing community well-being.