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What Should We Expect from the Blue Green Algae Task Force?

In its first year of existence, [Florida's Blue-Green Algae Task Force](#) gave the impression that it was going to drive a significant reduction in the occurrence of large blue-green algae outbreaks, such as the one that devastated the Refuge in 2018. However, since that time, the task force has been relatively quiet. Now there are some signs that it might be coming back to life. In this article we will review the brief history of the task force and suggest what has to happen for the task force to add value in the ongoing fight against harmful algal blooms (HABs).

2019: The First Year of the Task Force

In January 2019, Governor DeSantis established the Blue-Green Algae Task Force by executive order and chartered the group with focusing on expediting progress towards reducing the adverse impacts of blue-green algae blooms over the next five years. Dr. Tom Frazer, who at the time was Florida's Chief Science Officer, initially chaired the task force. Five distinguished scientists later joined him.

The task force met six times in 2019 and produced a [document](#), referred to as the Consensus Document, that contained a range of recommendations in areas such as septic systems, water quality monitoring, and [basin management action plans](#). In the last meeting of 2019, Dr. Frazer announced that, although the year was coming to an end, the task force would not end. He acknowledged that the recommendations contained in the Consensus Document were high-level and that developing more detailed recommendations would be the focus of future meetings.

2020: The Second Year of the Task Force

In 2020, Florida passed [Senate Bill 712, the Clean Waterways Act](#). Many politicians praised the bill and stated that it was based on the recommendations of the task force. See [more](#). However, most environmental groups said that few recommendations of the task force made it into the bill, mostly because of pushback from polluters. See [more](#).

One thing that the Clean Waterways Act did accomplish was that it directed the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) and Florida's water management districts (WMDs) to update storm water design and operation regulations. More on that later in the article.

The task force met only twice in 2020. The first meeting with the Florida Department of Health (FDOH) and the FDEP focused on two topics: whether Florida needs to establish a

state threshold for hazardous levels of [microcystin](#), and a review of the signs developed by the FDOH and FDEP to warn people of toxic algae blooms in water bodies.

The second meeting in 2020 was with the Army Corps of Engineers. The corps had come up with a simple metric that it thought was a useful indicator of a potential HAB. The corps wanted the task force to confirm that the metric was technically sound. During the meeting the task force raised several concerns about the metric and didn't confirm that the metric was technically sound.

A New Chief Science Officer

In March of this year, Governor DeSantis announced Dr. Mark Rains as Florida's new Chief Science Officer. It is unclear when Dr. Frazer stopped being Florida's Chief Science Officer. See [more](#).

2021: The Third Year of the Task Force

The Task Force met in June this year to discuss the use of innovative technologies to improve water quality. At this meeting, the FDEP discussed some of the projects it has underway that use innovative technologies to improve water quality by performing functions such as nutrient reduction, algae reduction and removal, and algae detection and prediction. Also at this meeting, the South Florida Water Management District (WMD) discussed its HAB monitoring in Lake Okeechobee and some of the projects it has underway to use innovative technologies to improve water quality.

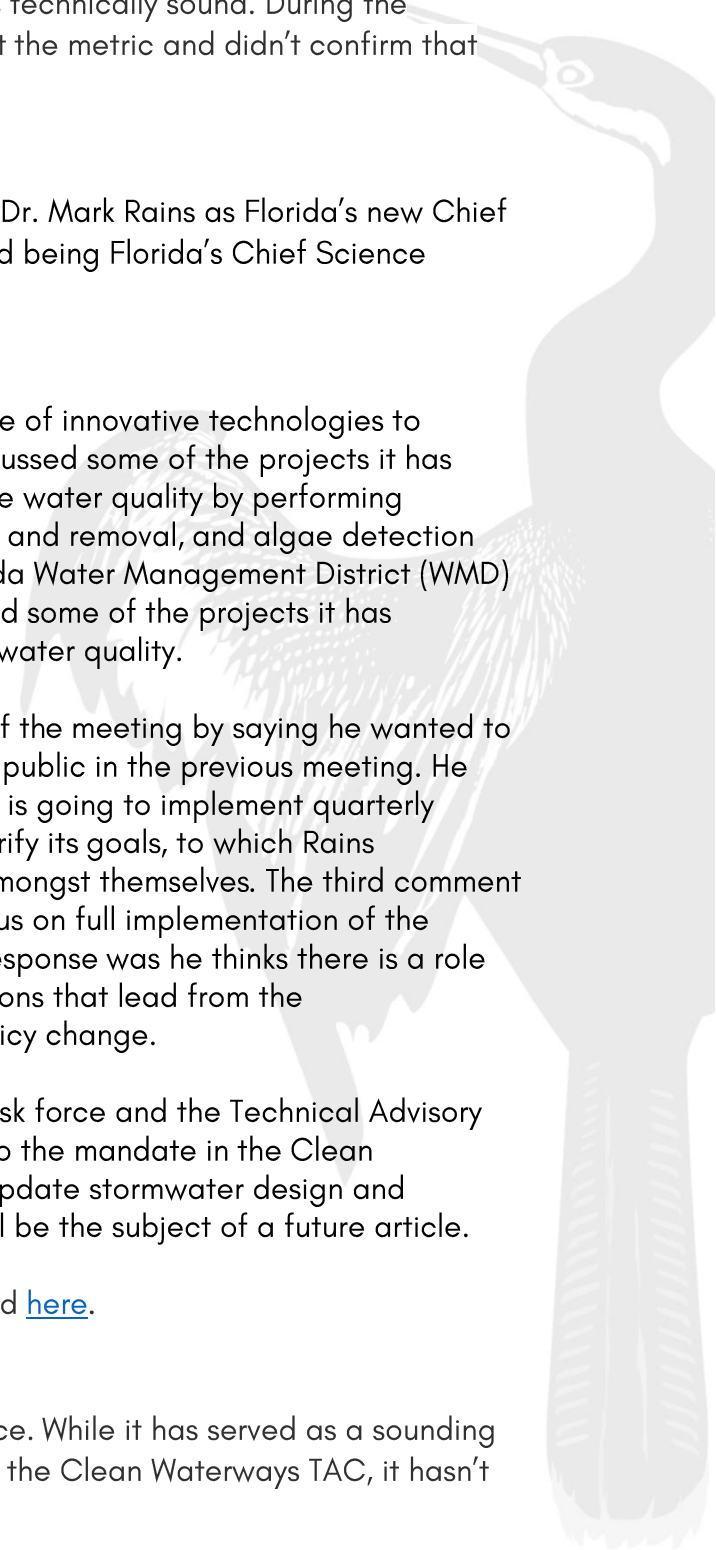
The task force also met in August. Dr. Rains kicked off the meeting by saying he wanted to revisit some of the comments they received from the public in the previous meeting. He said the public had asked for more meetings, and he is going to implement quarterly meetings. The public also asked the task force to clarify its goals, to which Rains responded the task force would like to discuss this amongst themselves. The third comment he discussed was the request that the task force focus on full implementation of the recommendations in the Consensus Document. His response was he thinks there is a role for the task force to reinsert itself into the conversations that lead from the recommendations in the Consensus Document to policy change.

The meeting focused on a discussion between the task force and the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) that had been set up in response to the mandate in the Clean Waterways Act for the FDEP and Florida's WMDs to update stormwater design and operation regulations. An analysis of this meeting will be the subject of a future article.

A video of all of the task force meetings can be found [here](#).

Where Are We and Where Do We Go from Here?

The task force met more often in 2019 than it has since. While it has served as a sounding board to organizations such as the FDEP, FDOH, and the Clean Waterways TAC, it hasn't



added anything to the content of the Consensus Document, either by providing more detailed recommendations or by focusing on HAB-related problems that were not covered in the document. It also has been largely absent from any conversation about turning the recommendations contained in the Consensus Document into policy.

While it would be advantageous for the task force to augment the Consensus Document to describe some additional HAB-related problems facing Florida, as we approach a new legislative season, the best use of the task force is to develop a science-based set of detailed recommendations of the type Dr. Frazer previously referred to.

To put the value of these recommendations into perspective, it is important to realize a big part of the challenge we all face is the Florida Legislature has a notably better track record at passing legislation that builds infrastructure such as reservoirs than it does passing legislation that encourages people and organizations to not pollute Florida's waterbodies. Armed with detailed recommendations Dr. Rains can help change that, but it is unreasonable to think he can do it on his own. Making that change will require the governor and some key members of the Florida legislature to embrace the work of the task force. It will also require support from all of us. Future articles will detail what kind of public support is needed and how you can provide it.

In Case you Missed It: There is growing interest in Florida for making clean water a legal right. See [more](#).

