



P.O. Box 2627 Stuart, Florida 34995 (772) 225-6849

January 24, 2022

Sent via electronic mail: toby.overdorf@myfloridahouse.gov

Representative Toby Overdorf
151 Southwest Flagler Avenue
Stuart, FL 34994-2139

Dear Rep. Overdorf,

As the Board of Directors of The Rivers Coalition, a group of 109 organizations representing over 400,000 constituents fighting for the health of the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon, we are writing to express serious concern about the seagrass mitigation bill pending during the current session of the Florida Legislature.

Since you are a co-sponsor of the House version of the bill (HB 349), we are asking you to rescind this legislation, which would lead to a net loss of seagrass in Florida.

Specifically, we are opposed to the bill for the following reasons:

1. U.S. Fish & Wildlife has declared an Unusual Mortality Event for manatees, which researchers have attributed to starvation due to lack of seagrasses in the Indian River Lagoon.
2. Seagrass loss has been devastating across Florida in recent years. For example, the St. Johns River Management District has documented a 58% loss in the Indian River Lagoon over the past decade. The northern end of Biscayne Bay has lost as much as 90% of its seagrass cover over the past two decades. Seagrass has almost disappeared from the once-lush Sailfish Flats area of Martin County.
3. This bill would expedite permits for seagrass-destroying projects in Florida. As you indicated during a Dec. 1, 2021, hearing on this bill, state regulations currently make it difficult to obtain a permit for projects that destroy seagrass in Florida. Credits sold through privately run mitigation banks, as envisioned by this bill, would make it easier to get approval for destructive projects. That's a bad thing.
4. Research indicates replanted seagrass is difficult to establish, vulnerable to water quality problems, and often not viable over the long term. There's no assurance that the destroyed seagrass would be successfully offset via mitigation as envisioned by this bill.
5. Even if replanted seagrass were viable, moving it away from its native location would be detrimental to water quality and ecology at the site of removal. In addition to providing habitat and food, seagrass helps to offset nutrient pollution and improve water quality.
6. Seagrass viability is largely dependent on water quality. This bill does nothing to rein in pollution or address the water-quality problems that are driving seagrass loss in Florida.

Creating seagrass mitigation banks that allow developers to buy credits to offset the destruction of seagrass is not necessary or prudent, given the dire condition of our waterways. While the Lagoon is severely impaired and sea grass habitat is perilously on the brink and manatees are chronically starved to death, now is definitely not the time to reduce protections and permitting procedures on already dangerously impacted nearshore habitats for docks seawalls or dredging.

We the people of Florida own the submerged lands where your legislation proposes allowing privately run mitigation banks to plant grass to offset destruction elsewhere. We're all for more seagrass on these submerged lands — but not at the expense of thriving seagrass elsewhere.

We respectfully request that you and your co-sponsors withdraw this legislation and focus instead on improving water quality in Florida.

Respectfully,

Mark Perry, President

Charles Grande, Vice President

Jim Moir, Secretary

Darrell Brand, Treasurer

CC:

State Sen. Ana Maria Rodriguez, District 39

State Rep. Tyler Sirois, District 51