A Guide to Understanding and Protecting the Southern Coastal Watershed

What is a watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that water flows across as it moves toward a common body of water, such as a stream, lake or coast. The boundaries of watersheds are determined by high areas of land. Water within a specific watershed will move across the higher land toward the lowest point within the area.

Southwest Florida
Water Management District

Southern Coastal Watershed

The Southern Coastal watershed continues to attract new residents and tourists alike. This watershed stretches 60 miles along the southern part of central Florida's gulf coast and is home to sandy beaches, world-class golfing and spectacular fishing. As more people arrive to enjoy all that the Southern Coastal watershed has to offer, the water and related natural resources within the area become increasingly stressed.

To help ensure that residents and visitors continue to experience the area's natural beauty, the District partners with local governments and other interested organizations, citizens and stakeholders to develop strategies that identify needed improvements and protections within the Southern Coastal watershed.

GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES

The Southern Coastal watershed extends along the southwestern shore of Florida from the mouth of Tampa Bay to the mouth of Charlotte Harbor and includes portions of Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties. Within this watershed are barrier islands and some of Florida's most productive estuaries, wetlands, coastal streams and canal systems.

Much of the Southern Coastal watershed is located within a 100-year floodplain, which means it is in an area that has a 1 percent chance of flooding one or more times during any year. While floods are a natural occurrence and are very beneficial to the flora and fauna within the watershed, the residents in the area should take steps to protect themselves and their property from flood damage.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

The majority of people who live in the Southern Coastal watershed live within 10 miles of the gulf. As a result, this watershed and other nearby water bodies are continually impacted by human activities, such as maintaining attractive landscapes and creating new roads and buildings.

Between 1980 and 2000, the population of Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties nearly doubled, growing approximately 77 percent. Therefore, over one-third of the watershed is currently urbanized. Coastal areas, including barrier islands, are almost all urbanized, while eastern portions of the watershed have substantial agricultural lands.

By 2010, the number of people living in these three counties is expected to be 88 percent greater than in 1990. Most of the future growth will be within the 10-mile-wide corridor along the coast. Eventually, the entire Southern Coastal watershed, except public lands, conservation areas and possibly some of the easternmost sections, is expected to become urbanized.

NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Human development over the past 50 years in the Southern Coastal watershed has resulted in a decline in the quantity and quality of the area's water and related resources.

WATER QUALITY

Water quality is a concern in the Southern Coastal watershed for various reasons. Impacts from wastewater treatment plant discharges, however, are improving due to facility upgrades and the use of reclaimed water in the watershed. Other concerns include agricultural and urban stormwater runoff into coastal tributaries and, ultimately, into the estuaries and gulf.

WATER SUPPLY

In addition to the quality of water, the limited supply of water within the watershed is of concern. Public supply represents the most significant water use within the watershed and increased population has put a strain on potable water sources.

Ground water from the Floridan and intermediate aquifers provides a major source of water in the watershed. Unfortunately, the ground water near the coastal areas is brackish and requires treatment before it can be used for public needs. Increased saltwater intrusion caused by excess groundwater withdrawals further exacerbates the problem.

FLOOD PROTECTION

The Southern Coastal watershed is susceptible to property damage from tidal and inland flooding. As continued development within the floodplain increases, so does the likelihood of flood damage. Some of the most extensive flood damage occurs as a result of tidal surges associated with tropical storms.

NATURAL SYSTEMS

Valuable upland and wetland areas are threatened by agriculture and increased urban development. These vital areas provide habitats for numerous species and provide recharge, decrease in runoff and water quality treatment benefits.

Southwest Florida
Water Management District



PROTECTING THE SOUTHERN COASTAL WATERSHED

The District protects the Southern Coastal watershed through a comprehensive approach to watershed management. This approach increases the District's ability to identify, prioritize and address water management issues. In addition, federal, state and local governments have implemented several programs to protect and improve the water resources within the watershed.

Local residents can make a significant difference in protecting the Southern Coastal watershed by taking a few simple actions. These include properly using pesticides and fertilizer, regularly inspecting septic systems for leaks, conserving water, avoiding disposal of toxins and garbage into storm drains and picking up pet waste in high "pet traffic" areas near water bodies.

WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Under the District's Comprehensive Watershed Management Initiative, a plan has been developed for the entire Southern Coastal watershed. The plan identifies top priorities and strategies for improving water supply, water quality, flood protection and natural systems.

The District is now working with other government agencies to implement the strategies. Many of the projects outlined in the plan will be funded and completed through the combined efforts of federal, state, regional and local governments, as well as industry and private partnerships.

SOUTHERN WATER USE CAUTION AREA

A "water use caution area" is where water resources are or will become critical in the next 20 years. Because of the strain on its existing groundwater supply sources, the Southern Coastal watershed is included in the Southern Water Use Caution Area (SWUCA). As part of the SWUCA, the water supply within the watershed receives special attention from the District in the form of recovery strategies, regulation enforcement and financial assistance to encourage development of alternative water supplies.

SURFACE WATER IMPROVEMENT AND MANAGEMENT

The District included Sarasota Bay and Charlotte Harbor on its list of priority water bodies for the Florida Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) act. Under SWIM, Sarasota Bay and Charlotte Harbor are eligible to receive state monies to implement specific projects to protect or restore these water bodies.

MINIMUM FLOWS AND LEVELS

The District is developing minimum flows and levels (MFLs) for rivers, streams and lakes throughout the District to limit withdrawals and avoid significant harm to the water resources and environment. MFLs protect the estuaries and help sustain the natural habitats that the watershed's diverse flora and fauna depend on. Cow Pen Slough and the Blackburn Canal/Curry Creek system are in the two tributaries in the Southern Coastal watershed for which MFLs will be established. Also, a minimum level for the Floridan aquifer has been established in the region to address concerns over saltwater intrusion.

NATIONAL ESTUARY PROGRAM

Under the National Estuary Program, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated Anna Maria Sound, Palma Sola Bay, Sarasota Bay and Little Sarasota Bay as Estuaries of National Significance and established the Sarasota Bay National Estuary Program in 1989. The program subsequently developed a conservation and management plan for restoring and maintaining the ecological integrity of Sarasota Bay.

Also under the National Estuary Program, the EPA designated Gasparilla Sound, Cape Haze and Dona, Roberts and Lemon bays as Estuaries of National Significance under the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program in 1995.

OUTSTANDING FLORIDA WATERS

The estuaries listed above also have been designated as Outstanding Florida Waters by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. This designation makes it easier to maintain good water quality within the estuaries by requiring additional protections.

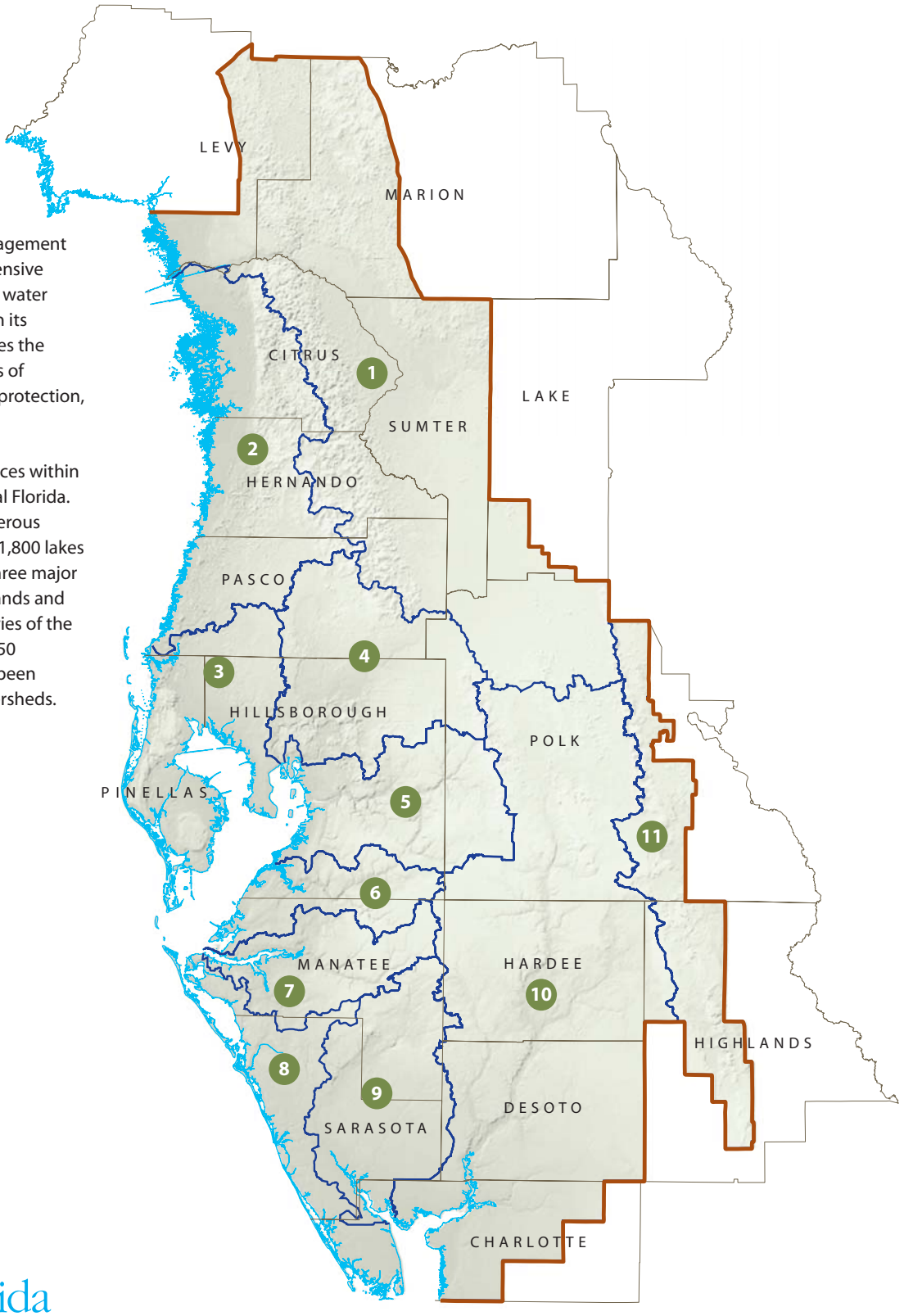


Open to see a poster-sized map of the Southern Coastal watershed

Balancing Water Needs ... Protecting Water Resources

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (District) takes a comprehensive watershed approach to managing water and water-related resources within its boundaries. This approach increases the District's ability to address its areas of responsibility: water supply, flood protection, water quality and natural systems.

The District manages water resources within 10,000 square miles of west-central Florida. This includes 13 major rivers, numerous smaller creeks, rivers and streams, 1,800 lakes that are 10 or more acres in size, three major estuaries, 1.1 million acres of wetlands and three aquifers. Within the boundaries of the District, there are approximately 250 recognized watersheds that have been consolidated into 11 primary watersheds.



Major Watersheds

1. *Withlacoochee River*
2. *Springs Coast*
3. *Tampa Bay/Anclote River*
4. *Hillsborough River*
5. *Alafia River*
6. *Little Manatee River*
7. *Manatee River*
8. *Southern Coastal*
9. *Myakka River*
10. *Peace River*
11. *Lake Wales Ridge*

Southwest Florida Water Management District

WATERMATTERS.ORG • 1-800-423-1476

This information will be made available in accessible formats upon request. Please contact the Communications Department at (352) 796-7211 or 1-800-423-1476 (FL only), ext. 4757; TDD only at 1-800-231-6103 (FL only).

VISKH 03/07

Southern Coastal Watershed

Spans nearly 390 square miles along the gulf coast of Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties.