



## **Our Water Story: Lee County's Water Quality Initiative**

### *Protecting Our Most Valuable Resource*

- **Lee County has an estimated population of 770,577 (US Census Bureau, 2019)**
- **The project team was staffed entirely in-house by multiple Lee County divisions and departments including: County Administration, Natural Resources, Innovation and Technology, Lee County Utilities, Conservation 20/20, and GIS**
- **Budget and funding sources for the project: Lee County General Fund**
- **The project objective was to create an interactive, motivating, informative, and interesting way to share Lee County's water quality story with the community and the world**

Lee County has the water quality challenges that often develop with a growing population and the accompanying land uses changes within a watershed. The County is actively engaged in the implementation of projects and activities at the local level to restore impaired waters. Improvements to unhealthy waters are an important goal for the County, but are also required under state and federal regulations; it is for this reason that the County works closely with other local, state and federal partners to try to solve complex regional water quality problems.

With the support of The Lee Board of County Commissioners, County Administration, Lee County departments and divisions including Natural Resources, Innovation and Technology, Lee County Utilities, Conservation 20/20, and GIS went to work to develop – entirely in-house – a web-based story map to tell the County's "water story" to the community. The story map is designed to highlight Lee County's water-related initiatives. It takes visitors on a virtual tour of the watershed as it outlines the issues and challenges as well as the steps the county and partner agencies have taken to help improve our local water quality.

The overarching objective of the project was to create an interactive, motivating, informative, and interesting way to share Lee County's water quality story with the community and the world. The initiative will include social media and traditional media campaigns highlighting completed, in-progress and new projects.

The strategy behind the story map was to create awareness of the County's remarkable efforts, a sense of place, pride in Lee County waterbodies, and a citizen call to action. Inspiring the community to join the County in taking personal responsibility to be a part of the solution is an integral part of the story map. The graphic and visually appealing elements in the story map help the user explore the realm of local water in a holistic way, via a digital storytelling experience.

Story map content includes:

- Introduction: Our Water Story
- What Are the Problems?
- What Are the Causes?
- What is Lee County Doing?
- What Are Other Agencies Doing?
- What Can You Do?

The interactive water quality story map project was initiated in August 2020, and went "live" on February 16, 2021. The story map is a living tool, and will be updated as needed.

Please explore the Lee County Water Quality Story Map here:

<https://www.leegov.com/water>



## **Our Water Story: Lee County's Water Quality Initiative**

*Supplementary Information*

**2021 NOMINATION:  
EXCELLENCE AWARDS  
FOR STORMWATER  
PROJECT**



## *Introduction: Our Water Story*

Water quality is a priority of the Lee Board of County Commissioners, which dedicates millions of dollars annually on projects and partnerships to improve water quality in our community. Yet, those projects often happen quietly, with the headlines and attention instead going to algae blooms or other events that occasionally occur.

Lee County decided it was important to tell “Our Water Story: Lee County’s Water Quality Initiative” not only to inform our community of the efforts, but to enlist everyone as an invested partner.

“Our Water Story” was created as a story map, so that it is interactive and easy updated. Below is a snapshot of story map content and a peek at each of the six sections. For a full view, go to <https://www.leegov.com/water>



Water provides Lee County with an environment and quality of life that lures new residents and visitors alike. Human activities, population growth, and watershed alterations, though, have caused significant impacts to the County's water and other natural resources.

The Lee County story map takes the viewer on a tour of the watershed, discussing the problems and causes as well as the steps the county and partner agencies have taken to help improve our local water quality. We can't do this alone, so we also share some ways residents can help keep our local waters clean and safe for us and our future generations. This page spotlights the major waterbodies in Lee County and provides a watershed tour for the viewer.

### *What Are the Problems?*

In this segment, the story map discusses some of the issues in our local waters including blue-green algae, red tide, red drift algae and aquatic plant overgrowth. The story map explains how increases in the concentrations of pollutants like nitrogen and phosphorus to the estuary can destroy the natural balance and even fuel algae blooms. It is an important part of the story to explain that an overload of nutrients in an aquatic system can allow opportunistic species take advantage of this issue to rapidly grow into blooms.



**Figure 1.** Blue-green algae bloom in the Caloosahatchee River

## *What Are the Causes?*

This segment helps the viewer learn more about the sources impacting our local water quality. The story map discusses stormwater runoff, water management impacts, septic systems, and other non-point pollution sources.

## *What is Lee County Doing?*

The Story Map provides details about Lee County's many steps to improve County waterways, such as implementing policies to foster sustainable clean water practices, funding projects to restore waterways, and enforcing stormwater violations. Lee County also works closely with other local, state and federal partners to try and solve complex regional water quality problems. One story map feature is a map of County water quality projects with project descriptions, costs, grant funding amounts (if any) and year of completion. This feature was developed to provide detail and transparency regarding projects, and show the public the extent of effort that the County has taken to tackle water quality issues. By clicking on a project marker, the visitor can find additional information about the project of interest.



### **Powell Creek Filter Marsh**

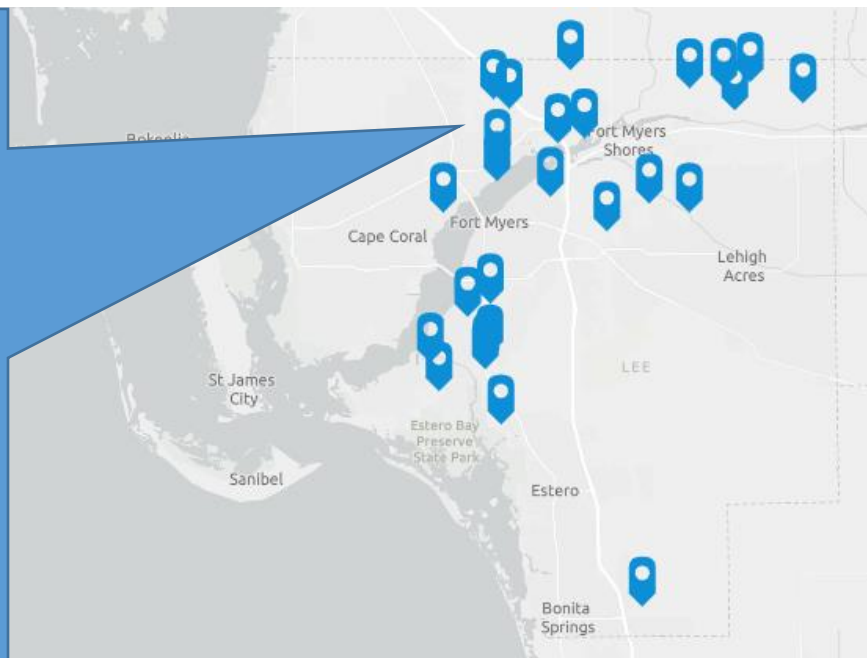
Project Complete

Three created wetland areas, trails and a stabilized crossing of Powell Creek were created during the course of this project. These wetlands remove 5,244.7 lbs of nitrogen and 2,053.1 lbs of phosphorus a year. It treats around 1,169 acres. This project was led by Natural Resources in partnership with FDEP and SFWMD.

Total Cost: \$3,485,817

Grant Amount: \$440,000

Year Completed: 2013



**Figure 2.** The Story Map shows the location of Lee County water quality projects, and the visitor may click on a project location flag to get more detail.

## *What Are Other Agencies Doing?*

Here the County emphasizes that “we are all in it together” and that our partners at state, federal, and local levels play an important role in advancing knowledge, funding research, and constructing projects to support water quality, environmental and natural resources goals. This section provides links to the US National Park Service, the South Florida Water Management District, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the US Army Corps of Engineers, as well as the State’s Blue-Green and Red Tide Task Forces and the Florida Department of Health. The story map guides the viewer to individual agency websites for the latest information on research, projects, meetings, and other activities underway to support water quality efforts in the area.



**Figure 3.** *What Are Other Agencies Doing About It?*  
*This story map page provides links to other agency websites, to make it easy for the viewer to stay up to date on partners’ efforts towards water quality issues*

## *What Can You Do?*

This section is a call to action. Our local waters need everyone to be a part of the solution. What citizens do matters, and it can be an important piece in the solution to the puzzle. The story map states “Together, we can preserve and restore the quality of our waters.” This story map page touches on appropriate fertilizer practices, pet waste disposal, stormwater pond management, septic tank maintenance, and personal pollution.

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Lee County launches new resource website “Our Water Story: Lee County's Water Quality Initiative”**

Fort Myers, FL, Feb. 16, 2021 – Lee County today launched a new citizen resource website, “Our Water Story: Lee County's Water Quality Initiative.”

The website, [www.leegov.com/water](http://www.leegov.com/water), invites Lee County residents to learn our water story, how we got to where we are, what we are doing to fix it, and how they can help shape the future of our waterways. Water quality is a top priority of the Lee Board of County Commissioners and water-quality projects are underway year-round.

The site features a story map to take visitors on a tour of the watershed, discussing the challenges and causes as well as the steps Lee County and partner agencies have taken to help improve local water quality.

The initiative will include social media and traditional media campaigns highlighting completed, in-progress and new projects.

Water quality affects residents and visitors alike, and everyone has an opportunity to be a part of the solution, even during every-day activities such as walking the dog or taking care of the lawn. To encourage engagement, the site also provides links to partner agencies and organizations.

For more, log on to [www.leegov.com/water](http://www.leegov.com/water).

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“Our Water Story,” as mentioned in the news release above announcing the launch of the site, is an ongoing effort that will be updated and will evolve as we enlist our community. We are looking forward to the next chapters in “Our Water Story.”

