



An Issue Guide for  
**Our Home, Our  
Water, Our Quality  
of Life: How Can  
We Protect Our IRL  
Communities?**



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## Introduction

The Indian River Lagoon, or IRL, consists of three areas: The Mosquito Lagoon, Banana River, and the Indian River. None of these water bodies are actually rivers. They are lagoons: shallow estuaries where water from land mixes with saltwater from the ocean.

The region is home to over 3 million people in six counties and 86 cities or towns who enjoy recreating and harvesting fish from the Lagoon. Even those who do not visit the Lagoon often appreciate the value it provides as a storm buffer and for its scenic beauty.

The Lagoon is located between the mainland and the barrier islands, stretching 156 miles between Volusia and Palm Beach Counties. It offers world-class fishing and boating opportunities that attract new residents and tourists, making it important to local businesses in the 6-county region. In fact, the annual value of the Lagoon to the regional economy is estimated to be \$7.6 billion. Beyond the Lagoon's value to people, it is also home to a unique community of plants and animals.

Pollution coming from the land is a major threat to the Lagoon. Pollution comes from many sources such as lawn fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, pet waste, grass clippings, soil erosion, and poorly maintained septic tanks. This type of pollution is typically called stormwater pollution



### About This Issue Guide

The purpose of this document is to help us talk productively about the look and livability of our community.

### Deliberative Dialogue

It's not a debate. It's not even about reaching agreement. It's about looking for a shared direction and seeking common ground for action by carefully listening to one another while sharing our thoughts and what we care about.



Other events that pollute the IRL include hurricanes and in the southern region, high-volume, freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee.



Photo Credit: J. Whitacr

because runoff from rain carries these pollutants directly to the lagoon.

The solid portion of stormwater runoff (eroded soils, decaying plant materials, pet wastes, etc.) is also a problem because it accumulates as muck on the lagoon bottom. Muck can smother seagrass beds. Other events that pollute the IRL include hurricanes and in the southern region, high-volume, freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee. When discharges from Lake Okeechobee occur, billions of gallons of water stored in the lake can release excess nutrients and alter the balance of fresh and saltwater in the St. Lucie River Estuary.

The people who live in the IRL region depend on a healthy ecosystem for different reasons. Some fish for fun, while others fish for food. Some own a business with a view of the water, while others just enjoy knowing it is there.

Despite living in the same region and having the IRL in common, residents have a variety of perspectives and cultures. For example, even though the poverty rate (14%) is well above the national average (11.4%), there is a broad range of wealth in the region. All residents, however, care about maintaining healthy and vital communities. Fortunately, there are changes we can make to foster solutions to the challenges with the IRL.

## Option 1: Provide for Personal and Community Health and Safety

The Indian River Lagoon is a public good that serves the health and safety of our communities. Our health and safety depend on access to clean drinking water, healthy fisheries, and safe water-based recreation (boating, swimming, fishing, etc.). We must evaluate how our water infrastructure and land-use decisions affect water quality and identify ways to reduce negative impacts. Healthy and safe communities depend on our commitment to pursue efforts that reverse and/or prevent any harm that has been caused to the IRL. But this focus on human health and safety could create or ignore longer-term, systemic environmental problems that require significant commitment.



Photo Credit: J. Angy

Examples of what might be done	Some trade-offs and consequences to consider
1. Extend sewer lines to replace septic systems in key areas.	Some neighborhoods could be missed.
2. Develop collaborative partnerships among environmental, public health, and community-based organizations to improve communications, social relations, and coordination around water quality alerts and concerns.	Strengthening networks and building trust are long-term processes, and gains are not easily observed. Leadership and priorities change.
3. Beautify public access to the Lagoon, including restrooms and trash and recycling bins, especially near waterways.	Expansion of ongoing maintenance system would be required.
4. Update regulation, zoning, and incentives to encourage development standards that protect water quality.	These limit freedom for developers and property owners, and changes aesthetics in community. Residential and commercial development could slow and reduce tax revenue.
5. Improve access to the Lagoon for those who wish to fish from banks, bridges, canals, and piers.	This will require vehicle parking, turn-off lanes, and trash bins.
Additional actions?	

## Option 2: Care of the IRL Natural Environment



Photo Credit: R. Murray

The Indian River Lagoon is a thriving natural ecosystem and we must care for it. It is incumbent upon residents, local community leaders, and state and federal authorities to be good stewards of the IRL's environmental health. The actions that individuals and businesses can pursue must be supplemented by community actions to support new norms that reduce environmentally unsafe practices and pollution, restore degraded environments, and protect areas to ensure the health of the Lagoon and surrounding waterways. Our communities can flourish if our natural environment is healthy; we must treat nature as our ally. We are responsible for the quality of the IRL that future generations will inherit.

**But** this option may limit economic development today and reduce the resources that are available to address other immediate community needs.

### Examples of what might be done

1. Restore local water bodies by creating living shorelines and removing invasive species.
2. Promote Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ (FFL) on public properties and parks and residential areas.
3. Improve stormwater infrastructure and reduce impermeable surfaces.
4. Protect environmentally sensitive areas from development.
5. Establish an equitable, long-term plan to fund environmental restoration in IRL communities (e.g. Brevard County Save Our IRL Plan).

Additional actions?

### Some trade-offs and consequences to consider

Restored vegetation may block views and limit access.

Florida Friendly Landscaping may be prohibitively costly for some. This may dictate a narrow version of an attractive landscape.

Improvements may encroach on private property and could require easements.

This would limit development and potential for economic growth and could infringe on personal and corporate freedoms and property rights.

This would need the cooperation of multiple municipalities and counties and significant resident support.

## Option 3: Bolster an IRL-Friendly Economy



Photo Credit: J. Rogers

The Indian River Lagoon is a resource essential to our livelihoods and communities. Commercial enterprises depend on the IRL to generate economic growth and provide jobs in our communities. A thriving regional economy demands that we attract tourists, innovative talent, and a skilled workforce; convert to IRL-friendly business practices; host recreational events; and support commercial fishers. We need to welcome economic enterprise, and in turn, entrepreneurs and developers should follow and promote IRL-friendly practices while serving the IRL community. The market will respond to local demand for a cleaner, safer

IRL that attracts visitors and welcomes responsible economic growth: low-impact, resource-efficient, and socially inclusive. **But** IRL communities are attractive to retirees and people pursuing economic

### Examples of what might be done

1. Promote low-impact development and improve rainwater management.
2. Encourage innovative green infrastructure and recreational green space to balance/offset impacts of infrastructure, urban development, and agriculture.
3. Develop private-public partnerships to attract investors in sustainable industries, aquaculture, and algae harvest and processing.
4. Promote technological innovation and affordability of existing technologies to improve the health of the IRL.
5. Establish an equitable, long-term plan to fund environmental restoration in IRL communities (e.g. Brevard County Save Our IRL Plan).

Additional actions?

### Some trade-offs and consequences to consider

Funding, staff, and time requirements to educate residents.

Completing a citizen-engaged process will slow the work being done by decision-makers. Time is money.

This will remove resources and staff from other priorities.

Development is a competitive and lucrative business. Too many regulations may force good developers to leave our region.

This would need the cooperation of multiple municipalities and counties and significant resident support.

What can we expect from a deliberative forum?	What should we not expect?
A civic and respectful atmosphere	Minds to be changed
Listening to understand diverse ideas and differences of opinion	Consensus
Welcoming atmosphere for participation	An action plan
Exploring the nuances and ambiguities of the issue	Quick solution
Deepened understanding	
Realizing areas of agreement and disagreement	
Identifying possible next steps for decision makers and/or citizens	
Future dialogue considerations	

CIVIC is an Extension program of both Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University and the University of Florida IFAS Extension that builds capacity in communities to work toward their improved well-being. Through deliberative discussions and town hall meetings, CIVIC activities provide information and engage communities in the hard work of discussing contentious issues that require community-scale solutions. Learn more at: <https://programs.ifas.ufl.edu/civic/>



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