

# BLACK WATER, KEEP ON ROLLING



## Laws, volunteers work for St. Marys River

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**A**nna Laws was born of the marsh and the coast — a native of Brunswick, Ga., she traveled far across the planet in her studies and research, but a few years ago she took up the task of advocating for a river and watershed not too far from home.

Laws is the St. Marys Riverkeeper, which as an organization speaks for the river's watershed and the area around Amelia Island, including the Nassau River.

"A lot of the threats on the St. Marys River are different than some of the other rivers, especially that you would see in Florida," Laws said. "We're a black water river, and our primary threat is rapid development. Some of the impairments we had in our watershed, we had fecal coliform impairments from septic systems that weren't properly managed."

She attended the College of Charleston for her undergraduate degree, then studied at the Durrell Institute of Conservation and Ecology at the University of Kent, in England, for her master's degree. It led to work looking into the effects of oil palm plantations in Borneo. She's also worked in Kenya and for Oregon State University in different ecologist roles.

Closer to home, the St. Marys Riverkeeper is part of the Waterkeeper Alliance, which began in western New York to deal with heavy pollution in area waterways.



PHOTOS BY KENDRA SHAFER/FOR THE NEWS-LEADER

**Anna Laws has served as the St. Marys Riverkeeper since 2019, and her role is to monitor and protect the watershed.**

"Waterkeeper Alliance was born out of that, and now, at this point, there's more than 300 organizations worldwide, and they all vary in their capacity," Laws said. "For example, I'm it for the St. Marys Riverkeeper, but the Buffalo Niagara Waterkeeper,

which has been founded for a long time and has been dealing with industrial waste up there — they're quite a large organization. But we were just founded in 2016."

Rick Frey was the founding riverkeeper in 2016. He stepped down in

2018, which led to Laws assuming those duties in early 2019.

Water quality is critically important in Florida for the environment, as a key driver to the economy and as a fundamental part of public health, Waterkeepers Florida Chairwoman Jen Lomberk said to Fort Myers public radio station WFCV recently.

"And one of the biggest threats to water quality in the state of Florida is urbanization," Lomberk said. "So about 900 to 1,000 people move to Florida every single day. We're rapidly losing the natural areas and the ecosystem services that the wetlands and natural areas provide."

Counties just across the state line in Georgia, especially Camden County, are working with the riverkeeper on what's called a 319 grant project to replace compromised septic systems. The number refers to a section of the federal Clean Water Act, and the money allows states, territories and tribes to pay for a wide spectrum of activities related to nonpoint source pollution. That kind of pollution is the sort without a single point where it enters the ecosystem.

"So, we're kind of born from the St. Marys River Management Committee seeing the need for a nonprofit partner on some of these projects, where we're trying to clean up the watershed," Laws said. "We initially started doing bacterial monitoring at a limited number of sites, because we knew there were bacterial impairments on the river. That's now grown into bacterial monitoring throughout the entire watershed —

over 50 sites that we do, including 10 sites right around here that the Amelia Island Sailing Club volunteers do."

It's a citizen-science volunteer program, in which Laws trains people who are interested in doing bacterial and chemical water quality monitoring.

"And then also, I go into high schools," Laws said. "Fernandina Beach High School is one of the high schools that is part of our program. They do monitoring on Egans Creek, and their monitoring has actually been pretty useful in helping to determine future management of the local watersheds."

"You need to establish a long-term dataset to really get to a point where you can understand what's going on. So at this point, they've been monitoring Egans Creek for three years now, so they have a healthy data set showing that it seems like there might be some septic issues in one particular area of Egans Creek, which is quite helpful."

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection received the data and is now doing its own monitoring, at a more thorough level.

"I see what we do as sort of supplementing these federal and state organizations that don't necessarily have the capacity to monitor every single site that we have here," Laws said. "We do long-term monitoring, and if we flag up something that is clearly a problem, then I communicate and share that data with the state, and they can start their own monitoring, and it goes in that way."

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