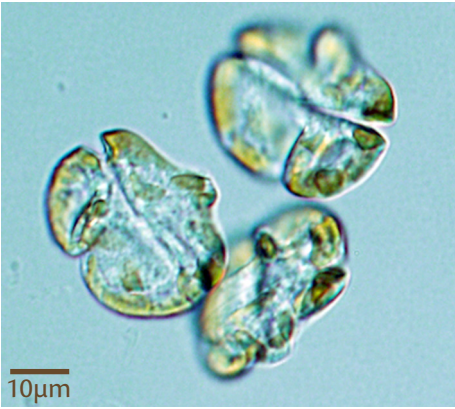


Red Tides of the West Florida Shelf: Science and Management

Native to the Gulf of Mexico, *Karenia brevis* is a dinoflagellate that blooms almost annually off the west coast of Florida. *K. brevis* blooms are not a new phenomenon on the west Florida shelf, as ships' logs suggest bloom-related events (fish kills) dating back to the 1500s. The nutrient sources supporting such long-term, prolific blooms, are multiple and complex. This newsletter outlines conclusions of a five-year study funded by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration's Ecology of Harmful Algal Bloom Program (NOAA-ECOHAB), in which researchers investigated the sources of nutrients fueling the massive, persistent biomass accumulations of *K. brevis* that occur on the west Florida shelf. This collaborative research effort included biological, chemical, and physical marine scientists. These researchers examined and compared the physical and chemical environment of the west Florida shelf with the physiological characteristics of *K. brevis* during multiple bloom stages (combined initiation and development, maintenance) and in different bloom environments (offshore, coastal, lower estuary, upper estuary).

FLORIDA RED TIDES ARE CAUSED BY THE TOXIC DINOFLAGELLATE KARENIA BREVIS

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



Karenia brevis (Davis) G. Hansen & Moestrup, formerly *Ptychodiscus brevis* and *Gymnodinium brevis*, is an unarmored dinoflagellate ranging from 18–45 μm in size. Dinoflagellates are microscopic single-celled organisms. Cells have two flagella that allow for movement within the water column at speeds up to one meter hr^{-1} . Like other dinoflagellates, *K. brevis* reproduces asexually by cell division but also has a sexual cycle that may include 'resting' stages. *K. brevis* is a plant-like microalgae, capable of creating its own energy from the sun via photosynthesis but can also use a mix of biological and chemical sources of energy as food. The species is classified as a coastal bloom species; however blooms can occur over a wide range of coastal environments and nutrient conditions. Blooms typically occur in late summer and fall; however they have been documented in all months of the year.

Left: *Karenia brevis*, the Florida red tide dinoflagellate.

KARENIA BREVIS BLOOMS ON THE WEST FLORIDA SHELF ARE NOT A NEW PHENOMENON

K. brevis is native to the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem, and reports suggesting bloom-related events (fish kills) date back to 1528. The organism responsible for red tide was identified and described in 1948 after the largest fish kill in Florida history occurred in 1947. The first nutrient-related *K. brevis* study was conducted in 1948 with the goal of examining the relationship of Caloosahatchee River outflow with bloom events.

Right: A bloom of *K. brevis* off the coast of Jacksonville, Florida. When *K. brevis* cells are present in high concentrations, they can discolor water.



RED TIDES HAVE LARGE ECOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



Karenia brevis produces a suite of brevetoxins capable of killing fish, birds, and marine mammals. Toxins can accumulate in filter-feeding shellfish (oysters, clams) tissue and can, if ingested by humans, cause Neurotoxic Shellfish Poisoning (NSP). The State of Florida continuously monitors for *K. brevis*, and commercial shellfish harvesting areas are closed when 5,000 cells L^{-1} of *K. brevis* are detected in the vicinity. There have been no NSP cases from consumption of shellfish from these areas. In addition, when cells are disrupted by winds, breaking waves, or surf, toxins may become aerosolized. This can lead to respiratory irritation in people at beaches and up to three miles inland from the coast, depending on wind conditions. Beach clean-ups, tourism-related losses, medical expenses, and lost work days during red tide events can average over a million dollars lost annually during harmful algal bloom events.

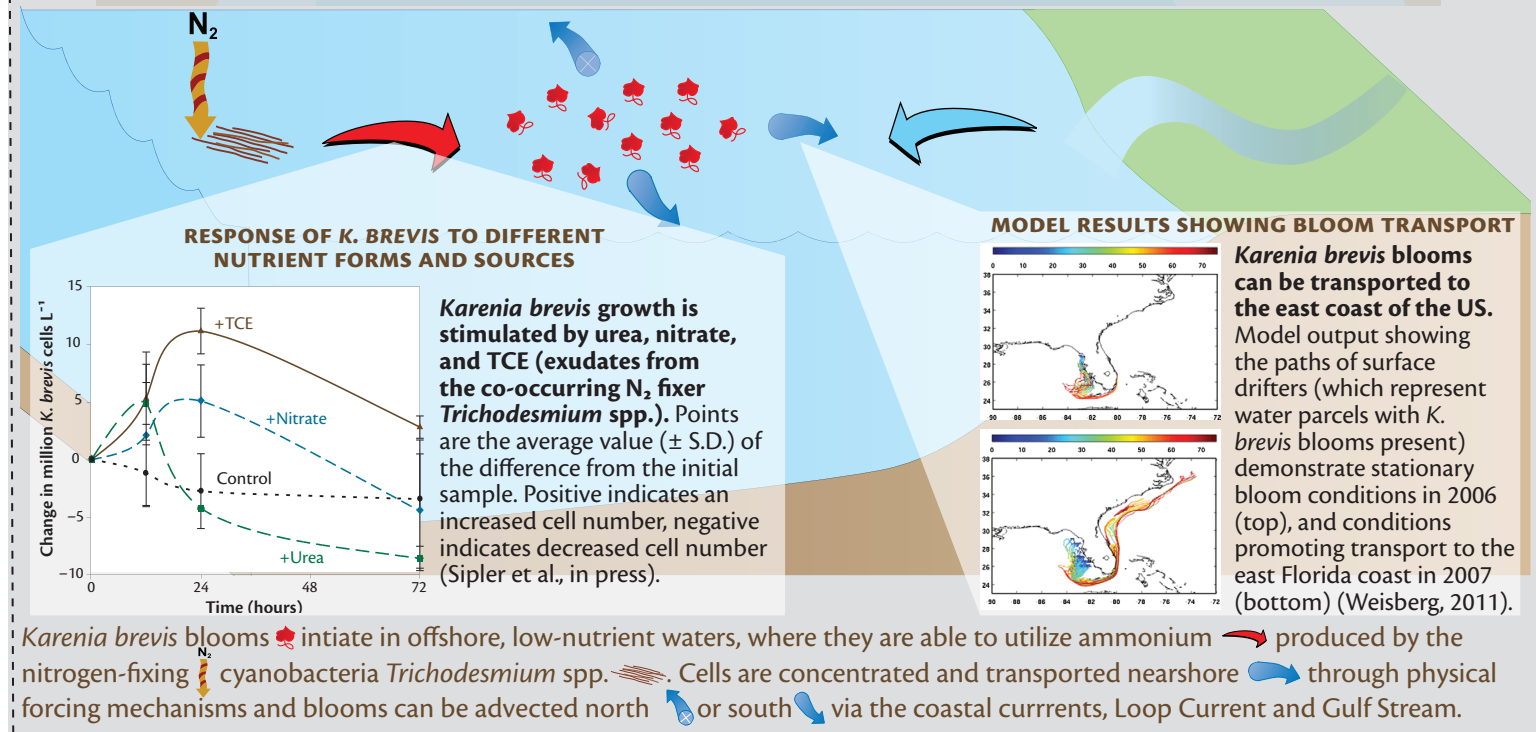
Left: A fish kill caused by a *K. brevis* bloom.

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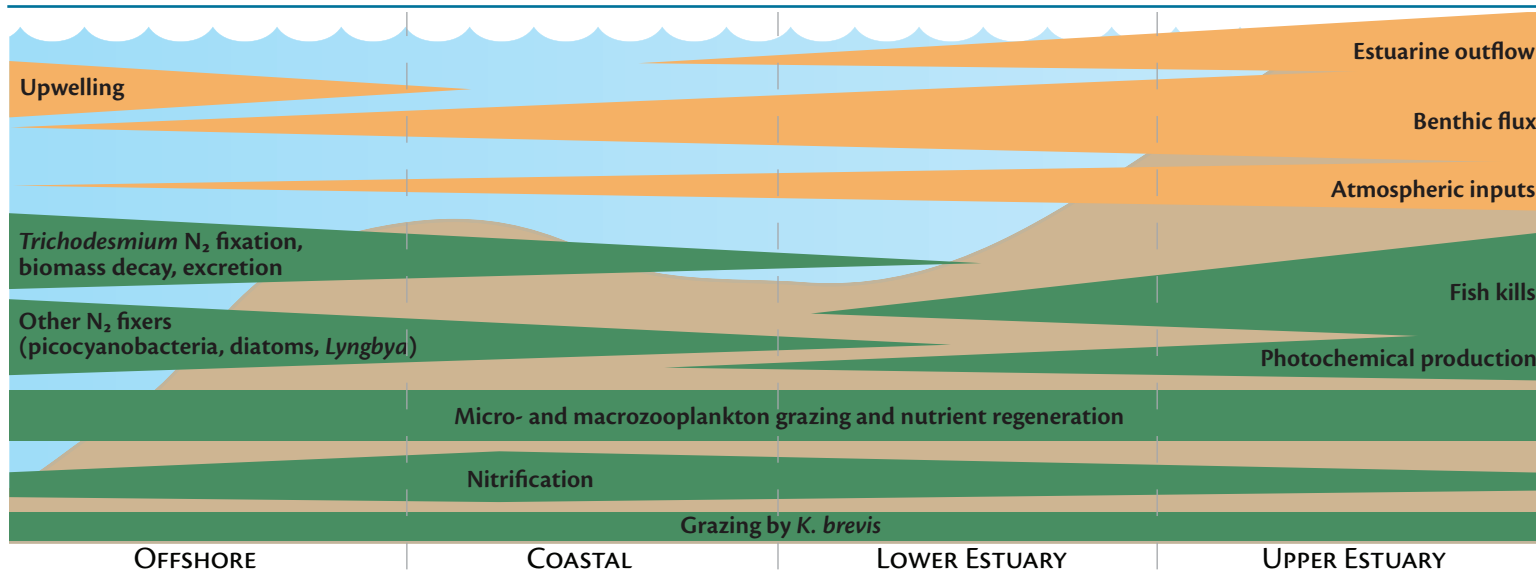
The West Florida Shelf is Prone to Red Tides

Karenia brevis is native to the Gulf of Mexico and blooms have been recorded off of Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida. On the west Florida shelf, blooms of *K. brevis* are common from the area off Clearwater to Fort Myers.

Red tide events, 1957–2012

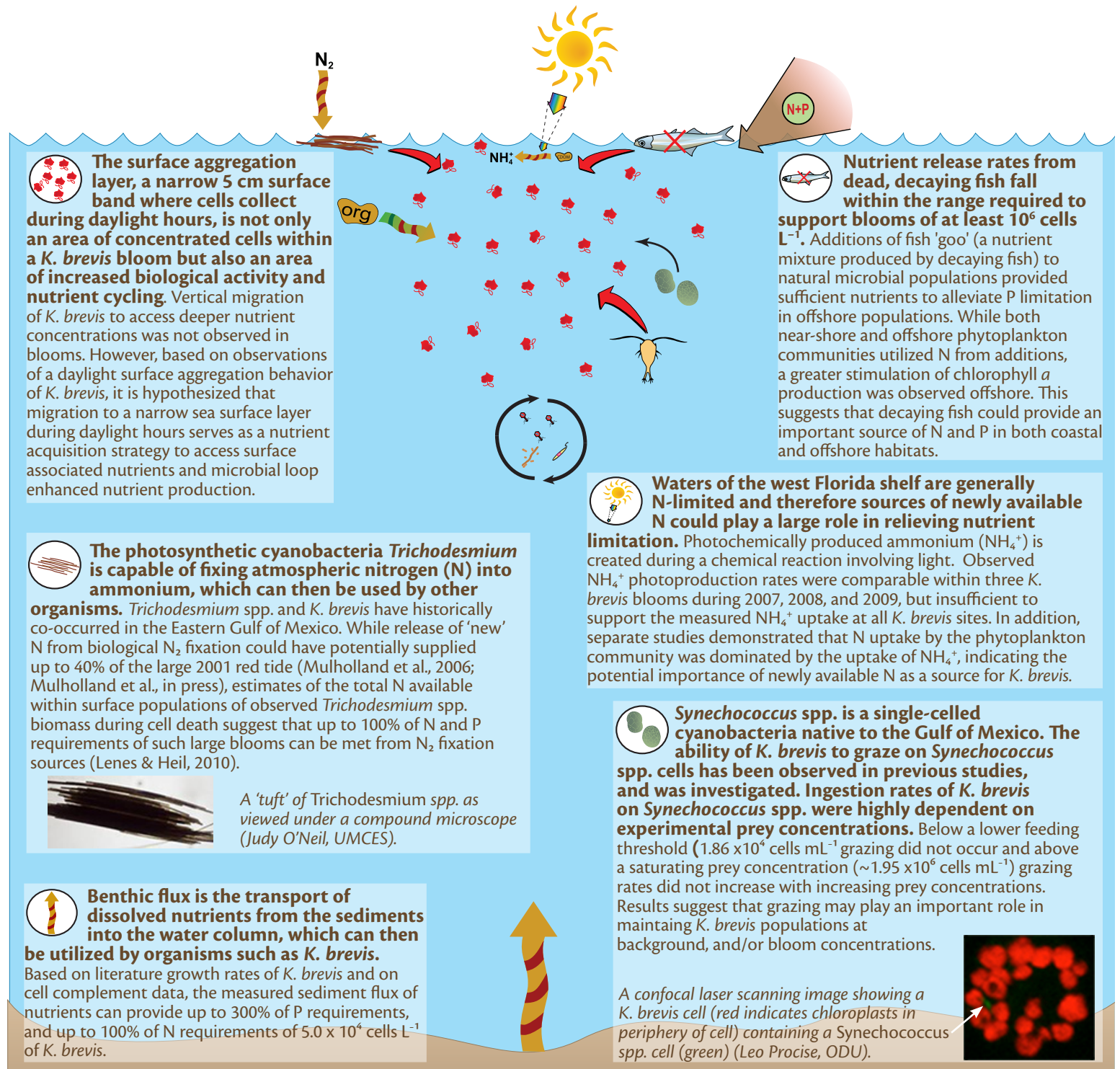


THE WEST FLORIDA SHELF IS CHARACTERIZED BY MULTIPLE, OVERLAPPING NUTRIENT SOURCES



External and *in situ* nutrient sources supplying blooms of *K. brevis* on an offshore-lagoonal gradient on the west Florida shelf. Length of bar/triangle indicates the relative importance of each nutrient over the gradient (offshore, coastal, lower estuary, upper estuary). Width of bar/triangle indicates relative importance of source in comparison to each other.

Nutrient sources supporting *K. brevis* blooms are multiple, diverse, and complex. The ability of *K. brevis* to utilize a variety of inorganic and organic nitrogen (N) and phosphorus (P) sources allows the species a significant ecological advantage. Known nutrient sources were quantified and evaluated for their relative significance. The largest nutrient sources observed were the decay and recycling of *Trichodesmium* spp. bloom biomass, and nutrient release from zooplankton grazing, followed by the decay of red tide-related dead fish, benthic nutrient flux, photochemical nutrient production, nitrification, and *Trichodesmium* spp. N₂ fixation. These were followed by estuarine inputs and pelagic N₂ fixation. New identified and quantified nutrient sources for blooms included nitrification, photochemical nutrient production, microzooplankton grazing, pelagic N₂ fixation, and *Trichodesmium* biomass decay. Many of these sources alone were sufficient to support observed bloom biomass. Additionally, as *K. brevis* bloom concentrations increased, nutrient cycling by the microbial loop increased in importance.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Multiple nutrient sources are available to *K. brevis* blooms but these sources are dynamic and vary with bloom stage and location.

REDUCE controllable nutrient sources through the implementation of best management practices, with the understanding that, given the complexity of *K. brevis* bloom dynamics, no direct impact on *K. brevis* bloom frequency or magnitude may be evident as a result.



Current research and management are limited in their bloom predictive capabilities.

DEVELOP further short-term forecasting and now-casting capabilities. With increasing knowledge and understanding of red tide dynamics and ecology, the need for effective monitoring and predictive capability is also increasing. Continue to provide red tide-related monitoring products that allow for effective targeting of monitoring needs with reduced fiscal and manpower resources for state harmful algal bloom managers (e.g. particle tracking products).



A working hypothesis of bloom initiation has been developed but requires testing and confirmation.

CONTINUE research on the conditions promoting bloom initiation, with the addition of regular 3D surveys of water properties and bio-optics using gliders. Such data is essential for forecasting blooms and their impacts, and developing targeted management strategies.



Specific physical and chemical conditions on the west Florida shelf make it particularly vulnerable to annually reoccurring red tides.

ADAPT to blooms on the west Florida shelf, as they are a chronic, long-term problem. Support, update, and maintain red tide-related mapping, modeling, and monitoring products. Utilize new and existing educational outreach programs to disseminate information and resources.

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Principal Investigators: Cynthia Heil (cheil@bigelow.org); Deborah Bronk (bronz@vims.edu); Kellie Dixon (lkidixon@mote.org); Gary Hitchcock (ghitchcock@rsmas.miami.edu); Gary Kirkpatrick (gkirkpat@mote.org); Margaret Mulholland (mmulholl@odu.edu); Judith O'Neil (joneil@umces.edu); John Walsh (jwalsh@usf.edu); Robert Weisberg (weisberg@usf.edu)

SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Newsletter design and layout: Brianne Walsh, UMCES Integration & Application Network
Newsletter content: Matt Garrett, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Cindy Heil, Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences
Judy O'Neil, UMCES Horn Point Laboratory

FURTHER INFORMATION

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