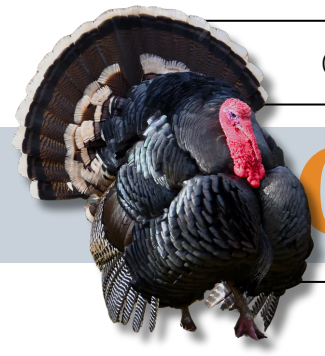


County Connection













Stay Engaged. Click the logos to join us on social media

Giving Thanks

I am thankful for the career I have had in public service. And I am thankful for the team of Okaloosa County employees who join me in making this a better place to live for our residents and visitors.

The challenges of this past year have not been easy and we have many more to come. But as I look around the County and see how those challenges have been met, I am thankful and encouraged in our ability to overcome additional hurdles that may be in our future.

We have a robust team behind every task in our County and with Board leadership and the decades of experience from our Department Heads, I am thankful to be a part of this team.

I want to encourage each of you this season to take a moment and reflect on what you find important in your life and what you are thankful for.

Please have a safe and enjoyable Thanksgiving with your families.

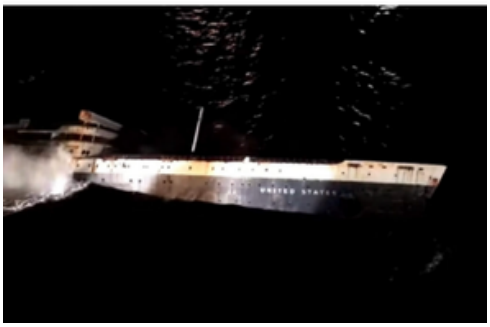
Thanks for everything you do.



John Hofstad
County Administrator

In the News

SS United States comes to rest on the Gulf floor as the world's largest artificial reef



The SS United States, the 990-foot ocean liner that still holds the trans-Atlantic speed record she set in 1952, slipped beneath the surface of the Gulf around 9 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 11, about 22 nautical miles southwest of Destin-Fort Walton Beach. READ MORE>>

Okaloosa unveils second Charters of Freedom, celebrates new women veteran statues on Veterans Day



Okaloosa County unveiled its second Charters of Freedom monument Wednesday at Veterans Park on Okaloosa Island, capping a Veterans Day ceremony that also celebrated four new statues at the Women Veterans Monuments and honored local veterans and their families. READ MORE>>

Marler Park closes for parking lot renovations, boat ramp stays open



Parking lot renovations at Ross Marler Park begin Wednesday, Nov. 11, closing the park until work is complete, though the boat ramp area stays open. READ MORE>>

Charter captain gets a porthole from the SS United States for catching the artificial reef's first fish



Okaloosa County Commissioners on Tuesday recognized charter captain Jon Polk for catching the first fish, a tripletail, on the newly deployed SS United States reef. READ MORE>>

Final Hurricane Isaias debris pass underway in Destin, Crestview, on state roads; Okaloosa, FWB finishing first pass



Okaloosa County's second pass will take place in late November, and Fort Walton Beach's debris contractor is set to start the city's second and final pass Nov. 30. READ MORE>>

Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport plans multistory parking garage with up to 2,000 spaces



Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport plans a $50 million to $75 million parking garage with up to 2,000 spaces, mostly paid for with the airport's savings. READ MORE>>

Department News



Pier Buddies

Take a kid fishing day and pups on the pier 🎧
Okaloosa Beach Safety's Buddy the Dolphin and Tina the Turtle made an appearance the recent Take a Kid Fishing Day at the Okaloosa Island Fishing Pier.



Guarding Life on the Beach

The 2026 summer lifeguard season has officially come to a close, and the numbers are impressive. Our lifeguards stayed busy keeping residents and visitors safe along our beautiful beaches. Our full-time lifeguards will continue daily roving patrols on the beach.

- Beach Census: 1,800,520
- Rescues: 34
- Drownings in Guarded Areas: 0
- Drownings in Unguarded Areas: 0
- More than 850,000 educational and preventative contacts



Helping Beyond the Bars

Step One Automotive made a stop by the Okaloosa County Department of Corrections during their Drive Out Breast Cancer campaign benefiting Ascension Sacred Heart Foundation.

Step One will donate $1 for every signature up to $5000.
The team at Okaloosa DOC contributed many signatures along with a $300 contribution towards the fundraiser.



Keeping Okaloosa Beautiful

Caught in a web of litter? That's one Halloween trick we don't want!

Keep Okaloosa Beautiful's Harley Peters joined the Halloween trunk-or-treat events at Mary Esther Library and Fort Walton Beach Library to talk with our community about how litter impacts our coast and the wildlife that calls it home.



Proud to Be An American

Congratulations to Emilia Cabral Setian, Environmental Analyst in Public Works, who recently participated in the naturalization ceremony to become a U.S. citizen.



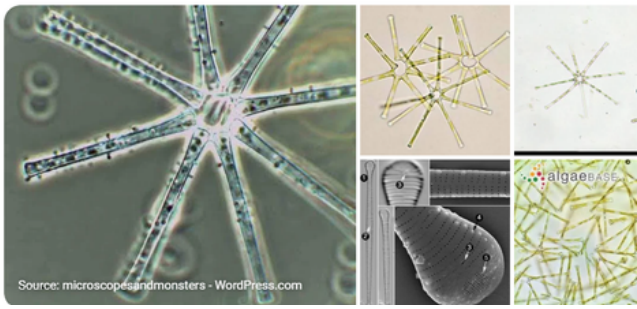

Invisible Powerhouses: Phytoplankton of Okaloosa County



Dr. Dana Stephens



Asterionella



From the freshwater streams in the Blackwater River State Forest to the brackish waters of Choctawhatchee Bay to the salty Gulf, Okaloosa County's waterways have a secret microscopic world. While anglers and beachgoers often look for dolphins, redfish, or sea turtles, the true foundation of our local aquatic ecosystems is invisible to the naked eye. This foundation is made up of phytoplankton.

What Are Phytoplankton?

Phytoplankton are microscopic, plant-like organisms that drift with the currents in sunlit surface waters. Phytoplankton are more commonly called algae. Though too small to see without a microscope, often measuring less than the width of a human hair, these plants are essential to all aquatic ecosystems...why? Phytoplankton are:

- The base of the aquatic food web—Like trees on land, phytoplankton use chlorophyll to convert sunlight, carbon dioxide, and nutrients into energy through photosynthesis. Tiny drifting animals called zooplankton eat phytoplankton; baitfish eat zooplankton; and larger game fish, shorebirds, and marine mammals depend on this food chain. Without healthy phytoplankton communities, Okaloosa County's recreational fisheries and coastal wildlife would not be possible.
- Global oxygen producers—Through photosynthesis, phytoplankton produce roughly half of the oxygen we breathe, making every second breath you take a gift from phytoplankton.
- Water quality indicators—Because phytoplankton respond rapidly to changes in water temperature, sunlight, and nutrient inputs (such as nitrogen and phosphorus from stormwater), scientists monitor their populations to gauge the condition of our local lakes, rivers, estuaries, and the ocean. When conditions shift abruptly, certain species can multiply rapidly in what is known as a "bloom."

If you're not a subscriber to our UF/IFAS Okaloosa County Extension Services' Extension Cord Newsletter, contact the Extension Office to join! You will learn more about Extension programming and can expect the monthly newsletters to include a Phytoplankton of the Month section.

Here is the November 2026 Phytoplankton of the Month!

Phytoplankton of the Month: Asterionella

Asterionella is a colonial (clustered) freshwater diatom abundant in lakes, ponds, and slow-flowing rivers across northern Florida. Under a microscope, these eye-catching microalgae are instantly recognizable: individual elongated, paddle-shaped cells join at their wider ends by a sticky mucilage layer, creating striking, star-like or wheel-spoke colonies.

Fun Fact

Unlike dinoflagellates that propel themselves with flagella, Asterionella cells have no means of self-locomotion. Instead, they rely on water currents to stay suspended. They use their unique star-like colony structure to increase drag, slowing their sink rate so they can remain in the sunlit upper layer of freshwater bodies where photosynthesis occurs.

email: dlbigham@ufl.edu

Recent Milestones



Congratulations to these Okaloosa County employees who are celebrating their work anniversaries. Pictured with County Administrator John Hofstad and Commissioners are Colleen Pardue, GIS Technician (25 years of service), Sheila Fitzgerald, Deputy County Administrator of Support Services (5 years of service), and Norma Montgomery, Purchasing (2 years of service).

In Case You Missed It

Regular Board Meetings



Nov. 3

- Board approved delivery approach for new multi-level parking garage at VPS.
- Okaloosa County commissioners voted to pursue a 12-month data center moratorium.
- Board approved the contract with Anderson Columbia Co., Inc. for the construction of a southbound right turn lane on PJ Adams Parkway at SR 85.

Nov. 17

- Board selected Commissioner Paul Mixon as the 2027 Chairman and Commissioner Sherri Cox as the Vice Chairman.
- Board voted to place a new jail on the legislative agenda as well as seek funding from the infrastructure surtax.
- Board approved funding for road improvements on Millside Road.
- Board directed staff to look into all options regarding persistent flooding countywide and in the Gap Creek area.

TIDBITS



The Florida Department of Health in Okaloosa County Community Health Assessment is now open through December 31, 2026.

The input from this guides and shapes what health services look like in Okaloosa County.

Please take a moment to fill it out. - Thanks

SurveyMonkey.com/r/2026OkaloosaCHA