

CHOCTAWHATCHEE BAY

Cited below are a few of the unique characteristics of Choctawhatchee Bay that supports its inclusion in the Gulf of Mexico Program as a priority water body for the state of Florida.

- The watershed encompasses 5,350 square miles covering 9 counties in Alabama and 6 counties in Florida. The Bay itself is 129 square miles.
- The estuary is primarily supplied by Florida's fourth largest river, the Choctawhatchee, including flows from Pea River in Alabama. Twelve percent of the watershed contains small basins along the border of the bay head.
- Fifty-eight percent of the watershed is in Alabama. Federal collaboration, hence, is essential to assure the health of this multi-state water body.
- Choctawhatchee Bay provides a natural habitat for the Gulf Sturgeon, *Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi* and the Choctawhatchee Bay is a conduit to a significant breeding area near Geneva, Alabama. The bay has been designated as a critical habitat by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.
- The eastern portion of Choctawhatchee Bay is bordered by Florida's fastest growing county, Walton County.
- The apex of development is the western end of Choctawhatchee Bay in the Ft. Walton Beach and Niceville metropolitan area, where most of the area is completely built out.
- The largest single landowner adjacent to the Choctawhatchee Bay is the United States Air Force. The Eglin Reservation not only borders the bay but it contains the entire watershed of numerous pristine spring fed creeks and streams such as Rocky, Alaqua, and Turkey creeks. The Eglin Reservation has an intense internationally acclaimed conservation management system. The reservation is the epicenter of biodiversity in the Southeastern United States.
- Included with the property owned by Eglin Air Force Base, additional conservation land along the bay totals nearly 300,000 square acres.
- The Bay is a dynamic system that has demonstrated a strong salt wedge for only about 70 years since the enlargement of the Destin Pass.
- The Bay supports a strong sport fishing industry in the Gulf of Mexico, and Destin Harbor hosts the largest fishing fleet in Florida.
- The Northwest Florida Water Management District is a significant steward for this valuable resource. The efforts of the District are somewhat impaired due to the presence of a constitutional advalorem tax cap not present in any other water district in Florida.
- Numerous public and private organizations promote ecosystem management and sustainable practices in the Choctawhatchee Basin. Foremost of these, we feel, the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance, and its cooperating local governments, that promote ecosystem management, public awareness, stormwater improvements, habitat restoration, and collaboration from private and public groups to sustain Choctawhatchee Bay and provide for optimum utilization of this resource.

- To address the full range of management options afforded surface waters by local governments; the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance (CBA) has initiated cooperative agreements with all Florida Local Governments in the Basin. This includes: Okaloosa, Walton, Holmes and Washington Counties and the cities of Niceville, Ft. Walton Beach, Destin, Valparaiso, Shalimar, Cinco Bayou, Freeport, Vernon, Bonifay, Chipley and Graceville.
- The CBA collaborates with foundations, government agencies and volunteer groups to sustain Choctawhatchee Bay and provide optimum utilization of the resource.
- The Bay has several candidate impaired waterbody locations. Almost all of the candidate sites are proposed due to reparable problems such as elevated coliform counts and can be correlated to stormwater runoff.

Thank you for providing support for the designation of Choctawhatchee Bay as a priority waterbody in the Gulf of Mexico Program. Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance is anxious to participate in the vital effort to optimize the health of the Gulf of Mexico. Ross E. Hamilton, Executive Director of CBA , can be contacted at 100 College Blvd, Niceville Florida 32547 or by email, hamilton@owcc.net, by phone 850.6509330 or 9743013.