

BAL HARBOUR

- V I L L A G E -

OFFICE OF THE VILLAGE MANAGER

LETTER TO COUNCIL

NO. 091-2020

To: Mayor Gabriel Groisman and Members of the Village Council
From: Jorge M. Gonzalez, Village Manager 
Date: June 26, 2020
Subject: **Accumulated Sargassum Seaweed on Bal Harbour Beach**

The purpose of this Letter to Council (LTC) is to provide an update regarding the ongoing efforts taken by the Miami Dade County Parks and Open Spaces Department (POSD), to address the Sargassum seaweed accumulation on the northern section of the Bal Harbour Beach near the Baker's Haulover Inlet Jetty and throughout the beach.

The Sargassum seaweed deposits were noted this year in early April and in response, POSD began the Sargassum collection according to their prescribed plan to remove these accumulations at specific "Hot Spots" along the County Beaches and specifically, the portion of the Bal Harbour Beach from the Jetty south approximately eight hundred (800), linear feet.

The current scheduled activities conducted by the POSD staff are detailed below:

1. Tractors with blades cut and turn the seaweed on the shoreline seven (7) days per week;
2. Bal Harbour Beach is scheduled to be sand sifted four (4) times annually. The Beach has received five (5), sand sifting actions to date, with more scheduled as operational capacity permits;
3. Sargassum seaweed "hot spot" removal by the County Contractor is currently supposed to be conducted daily from March to October and as needed from November to February. This collected Sargassum is prescribed to be removed daily;
4. Manual Dune litter control occurs once daily on Bal Harbour Beach and a secondary cycle is available as needed in the afternoon.

You should remember that the State of Florida has the legal jurisdiction of the Beaches and the Miami Dade County, Parks and Open Spaces Department is the primary organization permit holder charged with Beach cleaning and maintenance. Historically, the Village has significantly supplemented the efforts of the County in this area.

In the FY 2020 Miami Dade County Budget allocation for Beach maintenance, funding was secured to provide for the enhanced cleaning and seaweed removal efforts currently conducted by POSD along Bal Harbour Beach.

Additionally, in response to the COVID 19 Event and the subsequent reduction of Resort Tax revenues, the Village supplemental funding for Beach sand sifting and cleaning was adjusted. At this time, Bal Harbour Village funded actions to sift, rake and clean the beach, are suspended and will not occur unless the County efforts are insufficient to address the needs of the Village.

The Village included funding in the Beautification budget of the Resort Tax fund to augment beach cleanliness efforts and specifically augment (if needed), the efforts of Miami Dade County. Unfortunately, as COVID 19 has dramatically impacted the revenues collected in the Resort Tax fund, we have implemented significant cuts in our expenditures. The funding identified to augment the County efforts have been frozen at this time. I have instructed staff to monitor the situation closely and if necessary, we would revisit that decision.

It should also be noted that, while the shoreline of the Beach receives Sargassum seaweed cleaning, there is no State of Florida action permitted to remove Sargassum while it is present in the water. Since August 11, 2014, within the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico, Sargassum has been designated as a critical habitat for the Loggerhead Sea Turtle, by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973. This habitat designation includes the near shoreline presence of Sargassum. Since hatchling Sea Turtles are often present within the shoreline Sargassum deposits, mechanical equipment used to remove Sargassum seaweed within the water at the shoreline is not permitted by the state of Florida. A link to the entire document is provided for your review.

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2014/07/10/2014-15748/endangered-and-threatened-species-critical-habitat-for-the-northwest-atlantic-ocean-loggerhead-sea>

Last summer in the continuing effort to explore potential solutions regarding the seaweed issue, we met with several vendors who provide boom systems to prevent the seaweed from coming to shore and other vendors who supply boats that could move the seaweed while it is still in the water. Staff also participated in a collaborative meeting with Miami Dade County representatives to search for remedies. Efforts by private companies to development methods to remove Sargassum while it is in the water to reduce beach deposits continue. However, while these actions may occur in other regions and countries, we have been advised that until these methods demonstrate that they do not endanger juvenile Sea Turtles and the necessary permits are obtained, Sargassum is not permitted to be removed while it is present in the water along the United States coastline. Currently, these In-Ocean Mitigation strategies are not supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

We will reach out representatives of the State permitting agencies to determine if new information or strategies have been identified since our last interaction with them last year. As new information becomes available, I will continue to provide updates. If you have, any questions please feel free to contact myself or John Oldenburg directly.

JO/JMG