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Lawmakers: Quit flushing into Atlantic

BY CURTIS MORGAN

In Southeast Florida, a lot of what gets flushed winds up where people fish and sometimes swim.

Every day, six plants in Miami-Dade, Broward and south Palm Beach counties pump about 300 million gallons of sewage into the Atlantic Ocean. The brew is screened of its foulest components but remains nutrient-rich, not even clean enough to sprinkle on a lawn.

State regulators, with support from Gov. Charlie Crist and a key state Senate panel, are stepping up a push to phase out a practice that environmentalists, divers and some scientists believe has tainted reefs, marine life and beaches.

Draft legislation, to be reviewed in a Senate environmental committee hearing in Tallahassee on Tuesday, would give the only three Florida counties that dump sewage into the ocean a decade to upgrade wastewater plants from minimal to advanced treatment. If approved, it would end daily discharges, aside from limited backup use, by 2025.

T.J. Marshall, the Miami Beach-based coordinator for the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition, praised the proposal and said environmentalists would support a 10-year wait for cleaner outfall flows if it can end decades of damage.

"In my lifetime, we've pumped enough sewage offshore to fill Lake Okeechobee twice," he said. "It's probably the biggest environmental disaster in Florida, but because nobody sees it, nothing's been done."

SHOT AT PASSING

Sen. Burt Saunders, a Naples Republican who chairs the committee, believes the proposal has a solid shot at passing -- despite the counties' continuing concerns about inconclusive studies and a \$3 billion price tag to overhaul six plants.

"There is some question as to the amount of environmental degradation caused by this. There is no question there is some," Saunders said. "Regardless of the environmental impact, it seems to me that if you have 300 million gallons a day, when we get into these kinds of droughts that we have now, that resource would be valuable."

Miami-Dade, Broward and Hollywood -- which operates one of the two Broward regional plants -- have balked at initial proposals from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, opposing a shutdown of pipelines as too costly and demanding more data to support its impact on marine life.

CONCERNS REMAIN

The latest proposal hasn't eased the counties' concerns. It would ban any new pipelines statewide, cap existing outfalls at current levels, and stipulate a 2018 deadline for installing advanced treatment systems -- seven years before closing off the pipes for regular use.

Alan Garcia, director of water and wastewater services for Broward County, said the price tag only seems to

have gone up.

"It's really taken our scenario from \$900 million to well over a billion, probably \$1.2 billion," he said. ``Now we're dealing with two separate processes at the same time."

Doug Yoder, deputy director of the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department, said the county questioned the costs, timing and limits on ocean discharge that could leave sewage plants overwhelmed during "peak flow" events -- such as during heavy rainstorms, when wastewater volumes can quickly triple.

And neither Miami-Dade nor Broward has figured out how to recycle such vast volumes of wastewater, decisions that could dictate whether expensive advanced treatment systems were even needed. Yoder said Miami-Dade, which already is committed to \$1.4 billion in projects to reuse 40 percent of its wastewater over the next 20 years, would need to spend as much as \$2 billion more to meet the state's demands, an expense that could double consumer water bills already expected to rise.

"Logically, it seems like you need to make a decision about how you're going to reuse the water before you decide on the treatment," Yoder said. ``We don't actually have an identified need for this additional water now."

For Miami-Dade, supplying the 70 million to 90 million gallons a day that Florida Power & Light's two proposed nuclear reactors at Turkey Point would require is one option. But in Broward, which is largely built out, the options for reusing water are limited, Garcia said.

DEEP-WELL INJECTION

Garcia said the state should study potential effects of closing the outfalls. Broward, for example, might have to expand its use of deep-well injection, which pumps treated sewage underground -- an approach that some environmentalists oppose as a threat to drinking-water supplies.

Garcia cited an ongoing federal study that found that only 4 percent of the sewage from the ocean pipes is carried back over shallower reefs near shore. The sewage, he said, is almost instantly diluted and carried north in Gulf Stream currents. The outfalls empty from one to three miles offshore in 90 to 100 feet of water.

But environmental groups and some scientists have produced research showing higher concentrations of ammonia, nitrogen and other pollutants than the state has estimated.

They also point to direct impacts on corals from algae blooms that have decimated some Palm Beach reefs as well as increased diseases and other maladies. Many beachgoers also have blamed the pipes for periodic closures from high levels of waste bacteria, although no study has confirmed that link.

'WEIGHT OF EVIDENCE'

The Department of Environmental Protection, in a report on the proposal, doesn't claim a direct link between sewage and reef damage but says the ``weight of the evidence . . . calls into question the environmental acceptability."

Sarah Williams, a DEP spokeswoman, said ``we feel like even without data to show one way or another, there is a need for this water."

If properly treated, the water could be used for recharging groundwater supplies, irrigation, industrial use, preventing salt-water intrusion or even replenishing wetlands, she said. The treatment technology already is operating elsewhere in Florida, she said, and the state will offer counties loan programs to help bankroll

projects.

While it sounds expensive, Williams said, the counties would have to expand water and sewage systems anyway as populations grow. And the 300 million gallons of sewage, she said, happens to be exactly the amount of additional regional demand for water predicted by 2025.

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