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## State wants to reuse sewage water

### TALLAHASSEE

Lakes are reaching record-low levels and Floridians are facing water restrictions, but every day in South Florida, water that could fill 450 Olympic pools gets piped out to sea.

The potential water source is actually sewage -- 300 million gallons of it -- flushed down the toilet, lightly treated and pumped by water utilities into the Atlantic Ocean each day.

Environmental groups want to see an end to what they believe is an ecological hazard. Lawmakers, meanwhile, are interested in using that waste to combat the water crisis in Florida, where demand is expected to increase. Now the groups are working together to figure out how it can be reclaimed.

The waste water is coming from six plants located throughout Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. The sewage is strained, treated so that only the most hazardous substances are neutralized and then piped into the ocean, usually several miles off shore. Many people who swim, scuba dive and fish in South Florida find the practice unacceptable.

Florida and its cities have a responsibility to dispose of waste in a less harmful way, said T.J. Marshall, a spokesman for the Surfrider Foundation, an environmental group.

"What we've been doing for 20 years is dumping all our waste into the mighty Gulf Stream and sending it off to make it somebody else's problem," Marshall said. "We're world-class cities down in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and Palm Beach. We have a dirty little secret, and we need to fix that."

The Senate Committee on Environmental Preservation and Conservation unanimously approved a bill this month that would eventually bring an end to the dumping and put that waste water toward other uses. Under the bill (SB 1302), the utilities would have to submit plans to stop the dumping by 2013, and the sewage would have to meet stricter treatment standards by 2018. The ultimate goal would be to eliminate nearly all sewage dumping by 2025. Staff for the Environment & Natural Resources Council is working on a similar bill in the House.

Water-scarce South Florida will need an estimated 300 million gallons of new water per day over the next 20 years, said Phil Coram, a deputy director with the Department of Environmental Protection.

The waste water going into the ocean could be used to free up more drinkable water, he said.

With additional treatment, the waste water could be used for replacing ground water, watering lawns and improving wetlands, he said.

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