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# Water restrictions imposed due to critical South Florida shortage

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## MIAMI --

Thirsty crops, flower beds and golf courses will be some of the results of water restrictions imposed Thursday on southeast Florida, an area that encompasses about a third of the state's population.

The measures are aimed at cutting the region's water consumption by 15 percent and more in some areas. They come after more than a year of below-normal rainfall in South Florida, water officials said.

Weather and the success of the restrictions will determine how long they last or whether water managers take additional and tougher measures.

"We are getting some rain. The bad news is it isn't enough to make a difference," Susan Sylvester, a director with the South Florida Water Management District, said at a meeting in West Palm Beach.

"This is really about making people concerned, making them aware," she said after the meeting where they announced the new restrictions.

The mandatory limits come as Florida growers are heading into a part of the year where they need the most water. They also come as the state heads into two months that are traditionally the driest of the year.

Four counties on the lower east coast of the state will be affected by the restrictions: Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach. About 5.5 million of the state's roughly 18 million residents live in those areas. The west coast of Florida is already under year-round water conservation measures.

The restrictions will be most severe in the area of Lake Okeechobee. The lake is the main water supply for farmers in the area and the backup water supply for South Florida.

Some growers around the lake will experience cutbacks of 45 percent or more in their water consumption, according to a presentation delivered to water managers. The restrictions being imposed around the lake are considered modified "phase two" or "severe."

Tom MacVicar represents a number agricultural businesses that use water from the lake, including those that grow sugarcane, vegetables, rice and citrus.

"It's hard to grow a crop with half the water," he said, adding that growers he works with are apprehensive.

Restrictions in the four counties are "phase one" or "moderate." Phase three restrictions are the harshest. Water restrictions were also placed on agricultural areas in St. Lucie County.

As part of the phase one restrictions, water managers are limiting residential lawn sprinkling to three days a week during early morning hours. In addition, golf courses, nurseries and utilities are being asked to make cutbacks.

Local governments will oversee the restrictions. Violations are punishable by up to a \$500 fine or six months in jail. There may be some leniency where officials issue warnings while residents learn about the new rules.

The mandatory cutbacks are the first since a drought in 2000-2001 that left the state strapped for water. At that time, water levels in Lake Okeechobee ultimately fell to around 9 feet above sea level.

Currently the lake's water level is hovering around 11 feet, about 4 feet short of average levels during this time of year from 1992 to 2000, said Randy Smith, a spokesman for the water district.

Sylvester said the current numbers should not be taken lightly.

"I think everybody knew how bad it got in 2001," she said. "It's not too early to start conserving."