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SOUTH FLORIDA

Water cutbacks ordered for South Florida

As expected, water managers ordered limits on lawn sprinkling and most uses -- and this time the restrictions could wind up permanent.

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The days of wanton lawn watering are over.

Water managers on Thursday slapped usage limits on South Florida -- restricting homeowners from Key West to Palm Beach to three morning wettings a week and requiring golf courses, nurseries and other thirsty businesses to cut back by 15 percent.

Those steps, which take effect next Thursday, are likely only the start.

Homes in Miami-Dade, Broward, Monroe and eastern Palm Beach counties soon could be down to two and even one sprinkling day a week if a 14-month dry spell stretches as expected into June, the normal start of the rainy season.

Towns and farms around Lake Okeechobee also face more severe rationing and potential crop losses that could easily run into the tens of millions of dollars.

Water managers have already printed up citation books and said they will train city and county workers to enforce the rules. First-time violators typically would get a warning, but blatant or repeat rule-breakers can face civil penalties potentially up to \$10,000 per day.

The mandatory cuts are similar to those imposed during the drought of 2001 but later dropped. This time, water managers warned, they may stick.

"It may be time to consider, especially in the urban setting, year-round irrigation restrictions," said Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, which manages the supply for 16 counties.

THIRSTY SUBURBIA

Mike Collins, a member of the district's governing board from Islamorada, was more adamant, calling for a quickly enacted permanent conservation policy aimed at booming east coast communities, where sprinkling systems alone account for half of suburban water demand.

"It's got to happen," Collins said after the board unanimously approved the restrictions. Some areas, such as Lee and other southwestern counties, already restrict watering to only twice a week.

The district said several factors forced the cuts:

- 2006 proved the sixth driest year on record, with 40.75 inches across the region -- nearly a foot less than normal.
- Lake Okeechobee, the main source for nearby towns and a backup for the Everglades and coastal cities, is four feet below average. On Thursday, it stood at 10.798 feet.
- Levels are plunging in canals and the marshy Everglades conservation areas.

Water managers said "moderate" phase 1 cutbacks approved Thursday shouldn't cause large economic hardships or necessarily lead to brown yards across South Florida. Most lawns, they said, need only an inch or so of water every week during the dry fall and winter seasons and typically thrive without help during a normal rainy season.

"This certainly is not an onerous requirement to reduce your irrigation to three days a week," Wehle said.

CROPS FEEL STRAIN

The restrictions will be tougher on sugar, citrus, sod and vegetable farmers in the 700,000-acre Everglades agriculture area southeast of Lake Okeechobee.

Barbara Miedema, spokeswoman for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, said farmers have already been operating with 15 percent less since November.

Now, under phase 2 or a "severe" shortage declared for the farms and towns along the lake, the goal is to double that. But, the district admits, the reality is that within weeks, the water supply to cane fields could be cut in half.

Sugar growers lost \$100 million during the 2000-2001 drought. It's too early to say if this year will be as bad, but combined with two freezes that browned young cane, Miedema said, the drought amounts to "sort of like a double whammy going on."

In South Miami-Dade, most winter crops have been harvested, but nurseries and others will have to adjust to less water.

Larry Dunagan, who grows avocados and pole beans in the Homestead-Redland area, worries that a typically windy March might make things worse.

"I do not water an ounce or a gallon that I don't have to use," Dunagan said. "If the wind and heat and lack of rain persists, then yes, it will affect us. But hopefully we will be able to survive and make a crop."

LAKE WATER DIVERTED

Two water board members, Collins and Malcolm "Bubba" Wade, a U.S. Sugar vice president, said the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which co-manages the lake, exacerbated the shortage by continuing to dump water this year.

The releases were done to halt environmental damage to aquatic life suffering from high levels of polluted runoff caused by hurricanes. But Wade and Collins said the Corps went nearly a foot below what water managers wanted. The dumping also triggered devastating algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

"We wouldn't be in the position we're in today if we still had that water," said Wade.

Dennis Duke, Everglades restoration chief for the Corps, said the agency had aggressively pumped down in part because of concerns about the aging dike expressed by the district and former Gov. Jeb Bush.

Environmentalists supported the new restrictions but said water managers were issuing a contradictory message by continuing to give away water while saying there isn't enough to meet current demand.

Before voting 9-0 for cutbacks, the governing board approved a water-use permit for a new golf course in Palm Beach County that will draw about 30 million gallons a month.

Said Alexandra Larson, an activist from Loxahatchee, "We issue consumptive use permits like lollipops."

New water rules

The Phase 1 "moderate" water restrictions, which take effect next Thursday for Miami-Dade, Broward, Monroe and eastern Palm Beach counties, apply to all users. Full details on the restrictions will be posted on the South Florida Water Management District website, www.sfwmd.gov. Click on water shortage.

KEY RESIDENTIAL RULES

- **Home watering:** Odd-number addresses may use sprinklers from 4 to 8 a.m. and water with hoses from 5 to 7 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. Even-number addresses may use sprinklers from 4 to 8 a.m. and hoses from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. For homes with more than five acres, hours are 12:01 to 8 a.m. No lawn watering on Fridays.

- **New landscaping, planted for less than 30 days:** May be watered 2 to 8 a.m. Monday through Friday; the time is 12:01 to 8 a.m. for homes with more than five acres.
- **Car, boat and equipment washing:** 4 to 8 a.m. and 5 to 7 p.m. on allowed water days, depending on your address. Washing should be done on a unpaved surface or drain to one.

KEY COMMERCIAL RULES

- **Golf courses:** 15 percent cutback from permitted usage.
- **Landscape watering:** Same schedule as residential.
- **Nurseries:** Inside overhead irrigation allowed daily, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Outside irrigation allowed daily, 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Low volume irrigation and hand watering is voluntarily reduced.
- **Agriculture:** Overhead irrigation, 2. p.m. to 10 a.m. Moisture stress relief for citrus allowed daily, 10 minutes per zone, 11:30 a.m. to noon, 1:30 p.m. to 2 p.m. Soil flooding only for vegetable seed or rice planting, for sod harvesting or prior to burning sugar cane before harvest.

HOMEOWNERS' TIPS: SPRINKLER SYSTEMS

- **Check your system for leaks or broken sprinkler heads.** Turn system on "test" mode and watch each zone as it works. Make sure heads are not watering the street, driveway or sidewalks. If there are puddles, you're watering too much. Set timer to water before sunrise to reduce evaporation.

HOMEOWNERS' TIPS: REPAIR LEAKS

- **Check outdoor spigots and inside faucets for leaks.** A dripping faucet can waste 1,000 gallons to 2,000 gallons of water a year. A leaking toilet can lose 500 gallons in a day.

HAND WATERING

- **Confine flowers in pots** to one area for watering.

Compiled by Curtis Morgan and Georgia Tasker