

Posted on Wed, Mar. 07, 2007

LAKE OKEECHOBEE

Plunging Lake Okeechobee could bring water cutbacks

As a drought continues to takes its toll on Lake Okeechobee, water managers warn more restrictions could be on the way for South Florida.

By Curtis Morgan

cmorgan@MiamiHerald.com

With Lake Okeechobee rapidly receding and no rain on the radar, regional water managers said Tuesday they were being forced to install pumps to keep water flowing -- to farms for now and possibly to South Florida's suburbs in the near future.

The problem: When the huge lake, which doubles as South Florida's water barrel, drops low enough, gravity alone no longer pushes enough water into the canals that replenish irrigation systems for surrounding sugar cane fields and groundwater supplies for metropolitan Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

That happens when Lake Okeechobee dips to 10.2 feet above sea level, a foot below its current watermark. The lake could fall that far within weeks unless unexpected storms dent a drought that has hit hardest around the lake and across the Kissimmee River basin that feeds it.

The shortage could lead to stepped-up water restrictions across the region, said Randy Smith, a spokesman for the South Florida Water Management District.

Miami-Dade, Broward, Monroe and eastern Palm Beach counties, now under a voluntary water-use warning, potentially could see mandatory limits like watering the lawn in coming months.

"It's a series of triggers we hit. We're getting close," Smith said. "If we continue down the same path, it's very possible we could have to impose mandatory cutbacks."

Users that tap the lake directly -- rural towns as well as sugar farms, citrus groves, vegetable, sod and other growers -- already are under mandatory orders to cut back water use by 15 percent. The district is considering doubling that reduction as early as next week, Smith said.

For now, urban areas have gotten enough rain that lake water isn't needed to recharge well fields, Smith said.

But the Everglades Agricultural Area southeast of the lake, the heart of the state's sugar industry, is feeling the drought's effects, particularly on new plantings that will be harvested next year, said Judy Sanchez, spokeswoman for the U.S. Sugar Corp., a major cane grower.

"The crops are starting to suffer because of the inability to get water," she said. "At this point, in the middle of the drought, that lake water is our primary source."

Water district Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle said in a statement that the 14 temporary pumps being fitted on three water control structures along the lake's southern rim should provide farmers relief if the drought deepens.

Just two years ago, the lake was brimming with too much water after a series of hurricanes. But an aggressive effort to dump water -- with devastating impacts on water quality and marine life in the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers -- followed by a near-record dry spell last year has left the lake nearly four feet below its historic average.

January and February rainfall didn't help with a districtwide average of 1.94 inches, less than half of normal. With March and April typically the driest months, the lake is likely to keep dropping for months, with each sunny, windy day stealing about two-tenths of an inch in evaporation alone.

"The evaporation is really pulling the lake down more so than the discharges," said John Chediak, chief of water management for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Jacksonville, which co-manages the lake with the district.

Chediak said the lake is about a half-foot higher now than when it wound up at an all-time low of 8.97 feet in 2001. It could approach that mark depending on the weather.

There are some positive environmental ripple effects from the low lake, particularly for aquatic life killed off by high water, pollution and algae blooms churned up by hurricanes.

Paul Gray, Audubon of Florida's Lake Okeechobee sanctuary manager, said there are signs that submerged plants, once again exposed to sunlight, could regenerate -- just like the 2001 low that revived the lake and its world-renowned bass fishery. He just hopes it doesn't go too far.

"A draw-down is a good thing, but once you get down to 10 feet, the marsh is dry. We don't need to go clear down to nine or eight or seven," Gray said. "There are a lot of things like turtles and frogs and snakes that hunker down when things are dry. The longer you're dry, the more things you can kill."

Okeechobee gets emergency pumps

With the level of Lake Okeechobee dropping, regional water managers said today they were installing emergency pumps to draw water out for South Florida's supply needs.

If the lake drops below 10.2 feet above sea level, gravity can no longer propel water south through canals that supply the surrounding sugar industry and help replenish Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

The level sat at 11.1 feet today, and with little rain on the horizon and two traditionally dry months ahead, the big lake is likely to continue to drop fast -- and potentially could approach the record low of 8.97 feet in 2001.

The dropping lake levels also raised the possibility of some kind of water restrictions for South Florida in the future.

According to the South Florida Water Management District, the Lower East Coast Service Area, which comprises Monroe, Miami-Dade, Broward and eastern Palm Beach counties, currently is not drawing water from Lake Okeechobee or impacting lake levels because local rainfall has kept water supply levels more favorable in the region.

However, because the lake serves as the region's primary backup supply, a formal water shortage warning remains in place for the lower east coast. Though no mandatory water restrictions have been issued as part of this warning, the district is encouraging both residential and agricultural water users to voluntarily reduce their water consumption as a preemptive measure to avoid or forestall potential water shortage orders and mandatory water restrictions during the remaining dry season.