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Drought forces consideration of year-round water restrictions

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OKEECHOBEE, Fla. --

Florida's worsening drought conditions - one of the driest periods on record - could result in year-round water restrictions for residents and farmers as forecasters say no real relief is in sight.

Lake Okeechobee, a backup drinking water source for millions in South Florida and the lifeblood of the Everglades, is nearing a record low at 9.6 feet, four feet below average.

"Maybe the time is right to look at year-round restrictions," Chip Merriam, deputy executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, said Tuesday.

Last month, the district instituted temporary water restrictions aimed at cutting residential use by up to 30 percent, mostly outside watering of lawns and gardens. Farmers have had to cut back 50 percent. The state also announced that the fragile Everglades ecosystem would be cut off for any new or additional water supplies, meaning utilities will have to find new sources of water to supply demand for population growth.

It was the first time in history that Everglades water was deemed off-limits.

Merriam said the agriculture industry could soon begin losing crops. Tourism is also taking a hit as many of the state's inland waterways dry up, removing opportunities for boating and fishing.

"A lot of people think the fishing isn't going to be any good because (Lake Okeechobee) is so low," said Terry Garrels, owner of Big O Fishing and Airboat Tours in Clewiston on the lake's southern shore. "That's having a big effect on us."

Jason Ferrell, owner of Eagle Bay Airboat Rides in Okeechobee on the lake's northern rim, is also feeling the pinch.

"I make 75 percent of my money off tourism," Ferrell said, adding that he's seen a 50 percent drop in business.

The drought conditions are the second worst on record since 1895, said Ben Nelson, state meteorologist with the Florida Division of Emergency Management.

While summer months typically bring steady storms, officials say even average rainfall won't break the drought. In the last 18 months, South Florida has received 49.3 inches of rain, nearly 17 inches less than the 30-year average.

"Water conservation is going to be extremely important," Nelson said.

State officials estimate that 50 percent of drinking water produced daily in South Florida is used for watering lawns and gardens.

The drought is also creating prime wildfire conditions, historically a good thing for the Everglades because it cleanses the system and allows for new growth. But with so much development along the edge of the vast wetlands, communities could be in danger as summer storms bring lightning that sparks dry brush.

The lack of rainfall is a mixed blessing for the health of Lake Okeechobee, said the district's Susan Gray.

High water levels have kept vital sunlight from reaching the lake bottom, inhibiting plant growth and keeping the natural system from revitalizing itself.

"The lake has really needed this," Gray said. But the low water levels will also give way to the spread of exotic plant species that will have to be removed.

Drought conditions are being felt across the Southeast in Alabama, Florida and Georgia, where a massive wildfire has burned 87,000 acres. Officials in Florida say it may be several years before the state returns to normal conditions.