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ENVIRONMENT

Water woes could mean more limits

With Lake Okeechobee remaining low, water managers warn of tougher restrictions in the future.

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Sparse rainfall in August, a lucky hurricane season (at least so far) and continuing record lows in Lake Okeechobee.

It adds up to a case of drought déjà vu -- another looming water shortage that could be deeper than the one that cost farmers tens of millions and browned suburban yards across South Florida this year.

Unless a tropical storm or hurricane reverses a growing deficit in Lake Okeechobee, the region's water barrel, the South Florida Water Management District warned Monday that the rainy season will likely fall short. And while it won't change water restrictions for now, it could mean tougher, earlier and longer irrigation and water-use cutbacks next year.

"At this point, without rainfall, there's not much we can do outside of storing as much water as we can," said water district spokesman Jesus Rodriguez. "We're trying to capture every drop we can."

Through Friday, thanks to the driest August in two decades, only 30 inches of rain had fallen so far this year across 16 counties in the district. That's 79 percent of normal with only a month or so remaining in the rainy season. Lake Okeechobee, the main water source for surrounding farms and back-up for coastal cities, stood at 9.58 feet above sea level Monday, nearly a foot below the historic low for the date recorded in 1956 and four feet below average.

Water managers will discuss storage options at meetings Wednesday and Thursday but have ruled out two controversial proposals -- storing water in state wildlife areas and "back-pumping" water from sugar farms into Lake Okeechobee.

In a split vote last month, the district governing board decided not to tap farm canals to help refill the depleted lake, citing the trade-off of hundreds of tons of pollution and legal concerns.

Board chair Eric Buermann, a Miami attorney, said it would have made little difference to the lake. "There's just no water to pump," he said.

But the agriculture industry, particularly sugar growers, warned the rejection could produce huge economic losses and ignored the district's own predictions that shortages were likely to reach crisis levels during the winter growing season.

Farmers and other critics also argue that water managers and the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers made things worse by dumping more than a foot of water from the lake in 2006 because of concerns about hurricanes eroding its aging, leaky dike.

In July, after a promising soggy start to the rainy season after an 18-month drought, the board also eased some of the toughest water restrictions that had Broward and Palm Beach counties on once-weekly watering limits. Both counties, along with Miami-Dade and Monroe, now are on twice weekly schedules.

Current restrictions aren't likely to change for now, Rodriguez said. "It's the subsequent dry season we're worried about. That's when demand typically peaks and rainfall typically goes down."