

Posted on Tue, Apr. 17, 2007

ENVIRONMENT

Drought may force Glades action

Florida's drought is poised to break records and force more drastic moves, state officials told the governor.

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TALLAHASSEE --

Florida's drought has all the makings of becoming one of the worst in state history, requiring water managers to drain water from the Everglades to pump into drinking-water wells, state officials warned Gov. Charlie Crist on Monday.

Without emergency action, South Florida's drinking water could be poisoned by saltwater intrusion, causing damage to the water supply that could last a decade, they said.

"The key issue is to address saltwater intrusion, not to address future water consumption needs," said Mike Sole, director of the Department of Environmental Protection at a briefing of state agency heads for Crist and U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson.

Taking water from the three water conservation areas of the Florida Everglades may be necessary because the water level of Lake Okeechobee, the back-up water supply for most agriculture users and residents of South Florida, is already so low.

But Crist and other officials acknowledged that pumping water from the conservation areas could threaten crops and harm wildlife, such as wading birds, so it should be done only as a last-ditch measure.

"We will exhaust any and all avenues, including draconian water restrictions, before asking for that water," said Carol Wehle, director of the South Florida Water Management District, according to the Associated Press.

Environmentalists disagree, saying they want water managers to set tougher water restrictions, such as going to one-day-a-week lawn watering rather than two.

"We are very concerned they would turn to the Everglades as a source without first implementing more aggressive conservation efforts in South Florida," said Eric Draper of the Florida Audubon Society. "The first thing they need to do is turn the spigots off on lawn irrigation."

The dry conditions facing the state today mirror the drought of 2001, said Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson, except that it's happening six months earlier. Lake

Okeechobee is currently at a level of 10.08 feet, which is the lowest elevation ever recorded in April, he said. Officials are concerned the lake could drop below the 2001 record low of 8.9 feet.

State meteorologist Ben Nelson warned that weather conditions are not promising for restoring the water supply. He said 2006 was the third-driest year in the state since 1895 and, with the La Niña weather system cooling water in the Pacific Ocean, the state will likely receive less rain amid higher-than-average temperatures this summer.

- [On the Web | S. Fla. Water Management District](#)