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## South Florida hit by water restrictions

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MIAMI --

Crops, flower beds and golf courses will have to go thirsty after restrictions on water consumption were imposed on southeast Florida amid lower than normal rainfall.

The measures, instituted Thursday at a meeting of the South Florida Water Management District in West Palm Beach, are aimed at cutting the region's water use by 15 percent and more in some areas.

They come after more than a year of below-normal rainfall in the region, water officials said.

"We are getting some rain. The bad news is it isn't enough to make a difference," said Susan Sylvester, a director with the water management district. "This is really about making people concerned, making them aware."

The mandatory limits come as Florida growers head into the part of the year where they need the most water. They also come as the state heads into the two months of the year that are usually the driest.

Four counties on the lower east coast of the state will be affected by the restrictions: Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach. About 5.5 million of the state's roughly 18 million residents live in those areas. The west coast of Florida is already under year-round water conservation measures.

The restrictions will be most severe in the area of Lake Okeechobee, the main water supply for farmers in the area and the backup water supply for South Florida.

Some growers around the lake will experience cutbacks of 45 percent or more in their water consumption, according to a presentation delivered to water managers.

Tom MacVicar represents a number of agricultural businesses that use water from the lake, including those that grow sugarcane, vegetables, rice and citrus. He said growers he works with are apprehensive about the restrictions.

"It's hard to grow a crop with half the water," he said.

Water managers are limiting residential lawn sprinkling to three days a week during early morning hours. Golf courses, nurseries and utilities are also being asked to make cutbacks.

Local governments will oversee the restrictions and violations are punishable by up to a \$500 fine or six months in jail. There may be some leniency where officials issue warnings while residents learn about the new rules.

The mandatory cutbacks are the first since a drought in 2000-2001 that left the state strapped for water. At that time, water levels in Lake Okeechobee fell to about 9 feet above sea level.

The lake's water level is now hovering around 11 feet, about 4 feet short of average levels during this time of year from 1992 to 2000, said Randy Smith, a spokesman for the water district.

Sylvester said the numbers should not be taken lightly.

"I think everybody knew how bad it got in 2001," she said. "It's not too early to start conserving."