SFWMD

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Loss of U.S. Sugar big Glades concern

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07/22/2008
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Salisbury, Susan

CLEWISTON If U.S. Sugar Corp. isn't replaced with something equally viable, the towns and rural counties around Lake Okeechobee could be thrust into a 1930s-style economic depression, a Glades County commissioner said Monday.

Butch Jones, also a U.S. Sugar railroad engineer who chairs Florida's Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative Inc. and Florida's Freshwater Frontier Inc., made his remarks Monday before an overflow crowd of more than 400 people in Clewiston's John Boy Auditorium. Attendees wanted answers about how a $1.75 billion state deal to buy out U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration would affect their communities.

Last month, the South Florida Water Management District and GOP Gov. Charlie Crist announced plans to buy the Clewiston-based sugar company, its refinery, mill, 187,000 acres of land, railroad and other assets for an Everglades project.

The company, which employs 1,700, is expected continue to operate for the next six years.

But the deal, which is scheduled to close Nov. 30, has raised a good deal of concern in the farm counties around the lake.

Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness pointed out that Crist currently is in Europe trying to drum up business and jobs for Florida. 'We have the jobs right here. They are dependent upon agriculture and have been here for well over 80 years. We need to preserve those jobs,' Chamness said. Water Management District Director Carol Ann Wehle said she could not discuss details of the U.S. Sugar negotiations, but pledged to continue meeting with area residents to hear their concerns. 'It is our intent to be partners with the local community to minimize any economic impact and not to interfere with economic opportunities,' Wehle said. Greg Thompson, a 20-year U.S. Sugar employee who heads the local union, asked Wehle about how the restoration could work if West

Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp., which owns a substantial amount of land in needed for the project, turns down the deal.

Wehle said the project is more than a flow-way from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. It also includes 1 million acre-feet of water storage south of Lake Okeechobee, and that could take 15 to 20 years to build and provide many construction jobs. 'If we were to start in six years - and that is a big if - the impact is not going to be overnight or immediate,' Wehle said. Florida Crystals spokesman Gaston Cantens said the district has indicated it needs close to 45,000 acres of Florida Crystals land, 8,000 acres owned by independent growers, and 14,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's land for the flow-way.

Cantens said Florida Crystals is willing to consider taking over U. S. Sugar's mill and refinery in Clewiston while continuing to operate its Osceola mill and Okeelanta mill and refinery in . Pahokee and other communities are also concerned about the impact the deal will eventually have on the tax base, and the fact that the taxpayers in the 16 counties in the district, not the whole state, will be paying for it, Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said. 'I don't think that's fair,' Whitaker said. 'Governmental entities own 50 percent of Florida land already. That's entirely too much land for the state of Florida to own. That's not the American way. ''Let's don't kill the people that are doing the providing.'

FEATURE-Florida deal may sound death knell for Big Sugar

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07/21/2008
Forbes - Online

Tom Brown - Reuters, Forbes

OKEELANTA, Fla. (Reuters) - A $1.75 billion land purchase deal Gov. Charlie Crist announced last month to save the Florida Everglades could also mark the beginning of the end for the state's powerful sugar barons.

Florida would buy U.S. Sugar Corp, one of the largest privately held U.S. agricultural firms, and use a chunk of its 187,000 acres in the northern Everglades to restore the endangered wildlife habitat, Crist said. 'This is a dream come true for every Everglades advocate in the state,' said David Guest, a lawyer with the environmental group Earthjustice who has fought for years to sugar growers from sending fertilizer-tainted water into the Everglades.

The deal, which still has to be negotiated, hinges on the cooperation of another major sugar producer. If it goes through, the plan could close the book on the often unsavory history of sugar in Florida.

Experts say growing cane sugar in Florida would never have been possible if the state government hadn't drained the Everglades in the first place. And the cane would have disappeared long ago if

the federal government hadn't used the Army Corps of Engineers to micromanage the landscape, keeping conditions just right for growers at taxpayers' expense.

Never really operating in a free market, its growers have long been protected, like other U.S. farmers, from global competition. And they have profited at the expense of just about everyone -- from domestic consumers to farmers in developing countries and the once-precious Everglades environment itself.

The U.S. Sugar deal would put the company out of business after a six-year wind-down period. It would also give the state control over nearly half the 400,000 acres of of sugar cane that grows in the swampy, coal-black soil of the Everglades Agricultural Area just south of Lake Okeechobee.

About 16,000 acres of the U.S. Sugar land would be converted into water storage reservoirs, treatment marches and a flow-way reconnecting the lake to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

But the state will also have to negotiate with the Fanjuls, the owners of Flo-Sun whose name is synonymous with Big Sugar. The deal envisions using as many as 35,000 acres of their 180,000 acres of sugar cane for the same Everglades restoration effort.

The Fanjuls, who would be the last major sugar growers in Florida if U.S. Sugar is bought out, declined to be interviewed.

The deal puts Alfonso Fanjul, the reclusive chief executive of the family-controlled Flo-Sun, back in the public eye for the first time since his company's takeover of the North American sugar business of Britain's Tate & Lyle Plc, including its Domino sugar brand in 2001.

INFLATED PRICE

A cursory tour of the company's Florida Crystals Corp. operations in the steamy marshland near the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee gives visitors a clear view of at least some of what the Cuban-born Fanjuls have at stake.

Sugar-cane fields stretch to the horizon around the Florida Crystals mill and refinery. And their packing and distribution center shows how they control not just a vigorous manufacturing process, but much of the branded sugar sold in supermarkets including major retailers like Wal-Mart Stores Inc. (nyse: WMT - news - people) The politically savvy Fanjuls, Alfonso and his brother Jose, are legend in Washington for their defense of a U.S. program that sugar and confectionary users want dismantled.

The sugar program, an extension of policies in place since the close of the U.S.-British War of 1812, basically shields U.S. sugar cane and sugar beet growers from real-world prices and competition through a system of import quotas and loans that dates back to 1981. It pays no direct subsidies as with other crops, but guarantees growers like the Fanjuls an inflated price by restricting supply.

Little of that has changed under recent legislation governing U.S. agriculture for the next five years.

But U.S. sugar growers have been trying to come to grips with more liberalized trade after the end of remaining trade restrictions with Mexico earlier this year. And U.S. sugar imports could increase more if negotiators finally close a deal in the World Trade Organization's Doha round this summer.

Florida Crystals spokesman Gaston Cantens said the company sees the demise of U.S. Sugar as a potential opportunity to increase its U.S. market share, which could roughly double if it wound up taking over the U.S. Sugar Corp mill. But he declined to rule out a possible buyout of Florida Crystals as well, if the state government fails to sweeten the pot to lure the Fanjuls into its Everglade restoration effort.

If they close up shop, allowing Big Sugar to be booted out of the Everglades altogether, the Fanjuls would still have their sugar business in Europe and the Dominican Republic to tend to. From a sun-drenched corner of the Dominican Republic's southeast coast, they also run Casa de Campo, one of the Caribbean's most luxurious resorts.

One veteran Florida sugar analyst, who asked not to be identified, said the state could probably have the Fanjuls' land too -- for the same $1.7 billion. 'We'd have to cross that bridge if we got there,' said Michael Sole, head of Florida Department of Environmental Protection. (Additional reporting by Missy Ryan in Washington; Editing by Michael Christie and Doina Chiacu)

WATER TO THE EVERY EVERGLADES, A REPRESENT FROM THE

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07/21/2008
WINK News at 5 PM - WINK-TV

WINK News at 5 PM - WINK-TV

RIGHT NOW, LOCAL AND STATE AUTHORITIES ARE MAKING PLANS ON TRY TO HELP A COMPANY TOWN SURVIVE THE LOSS OF A COMPANY. TALK BOTHER FUTURE AND WHERE IT IS GOING TO GO. AND AND LIVED FOR 32 YEARS. AND FEARS THAT HER TOWN MAY NOT, AND I THINK IT WILL BE A GHOST TOWN. AND I THINK EVERYBODY'S GOING TO GET OUT. TO PREVENT THAT FROM HAPPENING THE CLOSING OF US SUGAR IN SIX YEARS. AND CAN THE 1 QUENCH, 000 OF SUGAR CANE, TO THE WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT. FLOOD THE LAND TO RESTORE THE FLOW OF CLEANER WATER TO THE EVERY EVERGLADES, A REPRESENT FROM THE GOVERNOR OFFICE OFFERED ENCOURAGEMENT. I THINK EVERYBODY EFFORT WILL BE MADE TO SUPPORT THIS COMMUNITY. I THINK HE'S VERY CONCERNED ABOUT THAT. ANOTHER COMPANY MIGHT BUY US SUGAR REFINERY AND OPERATE THEM. THAT WOULD SAVE SOME JOBS. AND SOMEBODY WOULD CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN THE US SUGAR AS IS. THAT TO ME WOULD BE THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION. AND IF IT WILL PERHAPS, AND THE KUFERM PURCHASE TODAY, THE SUGAR MILL TAKING OVER IN THE OPERATION. WE CAN'T GO INTO THE SHOPPING HERE, WHERE POOM MAKE THEIR LIVING

OUTSIDE OF US SUGAR AM AND SOME OF THEM ARE NOT FEELING VERY CONFIDENT. SHE SAID CLOSING OF THE COMPANY WORES JUST ABOUT EVERYONE IN TOWN. AND THAT HAVE COME IN HERE AND TALK BODY IT. LOCAL CITIZENS PROMISE TO TRY TO FIND OTHER NONAGRICULTURE COMPANIES THAT COULD SUPPLY AT LEAST SMFER THE JOBS THAT WILL BE LOST WHEN US SUGAR GOES OUT OF BUSINESS.

Public-sector jobs extend beyond City Hall and into the field of science

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07/21/2008
Palm Beach Post
Harris, JoAnne

By Joanne L. Harris - Palm Beach Post

Before you think that "public sector" applies only to city hall, emergency services or political positions, consider the plethora of prospects in the sciences. For instance, nearly every city has its own water plant, and it takes knowledge of chemistry and biology to work as a plant operator.

"Our water plant is a 24/7 operation, said Coy Mathis, assistant director of public utilities for the city of West Palm Beach. "It requires many pumps, motors and chemical feeders to make it run smoothly."

Plant operators add chemicals to the water that coagulate, or congeal, particles of dirt and sand. The particles become heavier than the water and can then be removed. After that, operators balance the pH for water stabilization, filter it again and then disinfect it with chlorine. Last, they pump the water into the distribution system to send the water to homes and businesses.

"Operators are responsible to turn the correct pumps and motors to move the correct amount of water that is needed for each day," Mathis explained. "They have to add the right level of chemicals via pumps, and they collect samples to test for appropriate levels of alkalinity, chlorine, pH, and total organic carbons."

It is a scientific process that requires keeping daily logs on all data, including what equipment is running, test results and chemical levels, Mathis said.

To work as a water-plant operator, you must first obtain a job as a plant trainee. Trainees need a high school degree or GED, plus an interest in biological and chemical processes. They earn from $31,117 to $46,675 annually.

The state of Florida Department of Environmental Protection requires certification if you want to become an operator. There are four levels, beginning with a "D" certification and working up to an "A" certification.

Trainees can earn a "D" certification after six months of practical experience on the job and completion of a Water Treatment I

certification course.

But the state requires operators to hold a minimum "C" certification - one year's experience and the Water Treatment I course - for any plant that runs 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Aspiring operators can take the course at Palm Beach Community College or online. Once they complete the course, they can take the test for certification. If they pass, they earn a "C"-level certification.

To earn a "B"-level certification, operators need to complete a Water Management II correspondence course and complete three years of experience. Operators can expect earnings of $36,086 to $54,129 per year.

The chief operator at a water plant must hold an "A"-level certification and have five years of practical experience, and have taken a management or supervisory course as well as Water Treatment I and II.

"In addition to science, skills sets for all levels include basic arithmetic and computer skills," Mathis said. "The water plant uses a SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) software program, which is used to monitor equipment, determine flow rates, and to turn equipment on and off."

SCADA operators work solely indoors. Other operators, however, divide their time between indoor and outdoor environments.

"Applicants need to recognize that this is an industrial environment," Mathis explained, "with moving equipment; an open environment; and hazardous chemicals, such as sulfuric acid and chlorine gas."

If you like maps and geography, geographical information system (GIS) stewards have a career in collecting, storing, manipulating and analyzing mapping data.

"GIS stewards work to answer questions we have about topography of land or spatial analysis - analyzing electronic maps," said Kurt Saari, section manager of GIS development for the South Florida Water Management District. "So much of what we do on computers is text-based applications. The GIS map system gives people a picture of data, as opposed to lists and charts."

The district might need to identify structures for water control, such as locks or pumping stations. A GIS steward - also referred to as a geographer - can use electronic maps to identify where current structures are located or where future structures are needed.

"When water restrictions went into effect," Saari noted, "boundaries became very confusing. Our GIS team created a map, based on zip codes, that showed what restrictions the residents were under based on their area."

GIS can be used to establish a new water-level-monitoring station at a lock. The information is loaded into the geographical information system to determine the best location for a new station or to determine whether there is already a suitable station

in the area. Maps can be downloaded to a GPS system or used to collect data in the field.

In the case of flooding, GIS stewards can identify where flood-control gates are located to determine which gates need to be opened.

In addition to a bachelor's degree in geography or a related field, such as biology, environmental sciences or planning, the position requires GIS knowledge as well as problem-solving skills and technical expertise.

In addition, a steward must know the district's proprietary software program. Thus, all applicants need to gain entry into the position via other technical positions. The district might offer internships, depending on departmental needs, so it is possible to gain on-the-job training as an intern.

FAU and other universities offer GIS certification. In addition, some people in technical positions at the South Florida Water Management District use the proprietary software that gives them training for when they become a GIS steward/geographer.

GIS stewards with four to six years of related experience would earn in the range of $53,310. With six to eight years' experience, they could expect to earn $68,036.

"The information-technology side of GIS builds the infrastructure that allows the GIS stewards to do their job," Saari said. "The job requires similar qualifications, but since we write software for GIS, data stewards - who are responsible for specific data layers - need an information-technology degree instead of the sciences."

Data stewards need four to six years of experience and a bachelor's degree in computer science. Application developer senior positions require six to eight years' experience and a degree in information technology.

So, you want to be an geographer?
07/21/2008
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Harris, JoAnne

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By Joanne L. Harris

Subject: Sharon Wallace
Title: Geographer
Where: South Florida Water Management District, West Palm Beach

Question: What does your job entail?
Answer: My role as a geographer for SFWMD (South Florida Water Management District) is to provide GIS (geographic information systems) and mapping support for the staff at the Okeechobee Service Center. This includes performing a wide range of scientific-related work, such as the collection of field data; conducting spatial and database analyses; maintaining spatial datasets; and producing high-quality map products for reports, presentations and other products.

Q: How did you get started?
A: After I was placed in a satellite office of the district, the need arose for on-site GIS support. I was fortunate enough to receive in-house training and began my journey toward a career change. My position with the district had been administrative, but I took on the additional responsibilities of a GIS technician.

Q: What was your job search like?
A: The beginning of my GIS training dates back to 1994, but it wasn't until 1996 that I moved from administrative to technical. I was in a senior administrative position and applied for an entry-level GIS-technician position because the industry had captured my interest. The fact that I had been doing the work for the past two years and was already an employee of the district gave me an edge over the competition.

Q: What do you like best about your job?
A: My job can be different every day. I support many different programs of the district, such as the restoration of the ecosystems of the Everglades, the Lake Okeechobee watershed, and the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. I also enjoy the work during emergency-management efforts. These include our current drought conditions and every hurricane season.

Q: What are some of the challenges?
A: The biggest challenge for me has been going back to school and finishing my degree. Currently, the budgetary cutbacks are making it more difficult to go to training and to conferences that are necessary to stay abreast of the constantly changing technologies and advancements in the geographic information systems profession.

Q: What skills are required to perform your job?
A: It is not enough to simply have experience using ArcGIS software. Cartographic skills are a must when you're creating high-quality maps, and a knowledge of environmental science, geography and natural resources help during analyses.

Q: What are the educational and licensing requirements?
A: Typically, a bachelor's degree in natural or physical sciences is a minimal requirement, along with two-plus years of experience that demonstrates a scientific discipline. In addition, getting certified as a GIS professional is encouraged.

Q: What compensation can someone expect to earn annually?
A: The SFWMD salary range for my position is a starting salary of $46,654.40 with a maximum of $82,284.80.

Q: What advice would you give someone looking to pursue this career?
A: If you want a career that is interesting and rewarding, and if you enjoy being part of the solution to preserving our planet, then pursue this career. Start by attending one of the many GIS forums that exist, such as the Palm Beach Countywide GIS Forum or the Southeast Regional Users Group.

State agency criticizes details in county water plan

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07/21/2008
Palm Beach Post - Online
PAUL QUINLAN

Paul Quinlan-Palm Beach Post

WEST PALM BEACH Palm Beach County needs to offer more specifics to meet strengthened legal requirements for ensuring its future water supplies, according to the state Department of Community Affairs.

The state growth management agency asked the county for more details about how it will meet future water needs, including the locations and costs of utility expansions and its plans to ensure that enough supply exists to support projected development. The agency's comments came last week in response to a draft of a long-range water plan that the county must adopt under 2005 changes to Florida's growth management laws.

Under the new laws, all Florida counties must draft such a plan within 18 months after the local water management district completes its own regional plan.

The South Florida Water Management District approved the latest version of its regional plan in February 2007.

Palm Beach County was the first county in the region to submit a draft plan, which is due in August. Similar plans are also due next month from more than 110 local governments in South and Central Florida, the district says. The state's criticisms centered on a lack of detail and minor inconsistencies, all of which state and county officials say they expect will be corrected in time. 'Once you get past all the technical details and some of the jargon ... there's a relatively short list of things that the county needs to do to fully comply with state law,' said John Mulliken, the district's director of water supply planning.

For example, a table of planned water utility projects provides only general descriptions, such as 'Reclaimed Water Facilities,' without mentioning the locations or how the county will pay for them, the report said.

The county also did not address its plan to consult with local water suppliers to ensure adequate supply before issuing certificates of occupancy to developers, according to the report.

State planners also noted that two sections of the plan list different projections of the county's 2025 raw water demand, 104 million gallons per day versus 113 million gallons per day.

The report illustrates the difficulties of developing a single, unified long-term water plan that must include input from eight municipal water providers. 'We have done our part,' County Planner Isaac Hoyos said. 'And we've been trying to coordinate with the local utilities so they can do their part.'

FGCU president Bradshaw tours Cape Coral

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07/21/2008
News-Press
By Jason Wermers

Jason Wermers - News-Press

Cape Coral officials want to make sure that Florida Gulf Coast University's Wilson Bradshaw doesn't forget about Lee County's largest city.With that in mind, officials accompanied Bradshaw on a brief tour of Cape Coral, including a stop by the 182-acre Academic Village property at Del Prado Boulevard and Kismet Parkway in the city's fast-growing northeast section, on July 11."We wanted to reintroduce ourselves to (FGCU) because there has been an administration change," said Bernard Dougherty, chairman of the Cape Coral Charter School Governing Board, who helped organize the tour.FGCU's board of trustees chose Bradshaw to be the university's president in August.

The Academic Village property has a longer history.

The city bought the land for $8 million in 2003. Paul Asfour, who was then on City Council and served as a founding member of the Charter School Governing Board, played a key role in that purchase. He had a vision for the land holding a branch campus of FGCU and possibly another college or university, along with a city-run charter high school.

Plans for the high school got bogged down in permitting delays by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District in January 2006. Both agencies cited the presence of environmentally sensitive wetlands on the property.

Since then, the city Charter School Authority has gone in a different direction. The authority is expected to ask City Council on Aug. 11 for permission to seek bid proposals to build a high school behind Oasis Charter Middle School in southwest Cape Coral.

The high school began as a freshman academy for about 30 ninth-graders inside the middle school last year, and is expected to

expand to about 75 ninth- and 10th-graders in the middle school this year.

The authority would like to see the new building, which could house up to 700 students, open in time for ninth- through 11th-graders to occupy it in August 2009.

The school would have all four high school grades by August 2010 under that scenario.

Economic realities appear to be making a permanent FGCU branch campus in Cape Coral a plan for the distant future at best.

The university is still developing a systematic growth plan, including where and how many branch campuses will be developed. Branch campuses are not a priority for FGCU now because of tight finances.

Susan Evans, the university's chief of staff, has said this fiscal year is the toughest FGCU has faced since planning for the university began in 1993, four years before it actually opened. FGCU had asked the Florida Legislature for $15.6 million to help it accommodate enrollment growth, but received no money under the budget that was passed in May.

FGCU does have a presence in Cape Coral, offering some classes and running the Small Business Development Center at trailers on Cultural Park Boulevard, across from City Hall.

Mike Jackson, the city's economic development director, unveiled a proposal in May that would have a research park at the Academic Village.

Dougherty said he wanted to take advantage of that proposal, as well as Bradshaw's newness to Southwest Florida, to spark interest in the property by anyone, including FGCU."That research park would be a tremendous opportunity for the city of Cape Coral," Dougherty said. "It would be great to see the Academic Village get up and running."Sal Catalfamo, who moved to Cape Coral in 2007, also was part of the tour. He was dean of enrollment management and chairman of scholarship programs at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and worked in higher education for more than 25 years."This region has so much potential," Catalfamo said. "It takes all of us working together to really move forward."He added that Cape Coral would be an ideal location for an FGCU branch campus because of the large number of students who live in the Cape. A campus in the Academic Village also would be more convenient for students coming from the northern part of FGCU's primary service area, which includes Charlotte, Glades and Hendry counties.

City Councilman Tim Day was part of Bradshaw's Cape Coral tour. Day said the tour was informal, and no specific proposals were discussed.

Is an FGCU branch campus still a possibility for the Academic Village?"That's what my dream would be," Day said. "But whether or not that comes to fruition is another matter."

WATER: House lawmakers to wade into draft research bill

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07/21/2008
Environment & Energy Daily
Boyle, Katherine

Katherine Boyle, E&E Daily reporter

Members of the House Energy and Environment Subcommittee will tackle draft legislation aimed at coordinating and improving federal water research at a Wednesday hearing.

The bill, which House Science and Technology Chairman Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.) plans to sponsor, would focus on ramping up water development, demonstration projects, education and outreach and technology transfer activities.

The hearing arrives amid growing concern in Congress over the nation's water supply. Many legislators worry that droughts in the Southeast and California are only a harbinger of what is to come.

Their fears are backed by multiple scientific studies. Recent reports indicate climate change and a growing population could lead to significant water shortages in the future.

Gordon's draft bill would attempt to combat those concerns and shore up federal research efforts.

The bill would create an interagency committee with jurisdiction over water to better coordinate federal research efforts. The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy would oversee the panel, which would have representatives from all agencies.

The committee would create a plan coordinating federal water activities, drawing on information from the 2007 Subcommittee on Water Availability and Quality report.

The legislation also would require the White House to submit budget guidelines for implementing the plan.

Schedule: The hearing is Wednesday, July 23, at 10 a.m. in 2318 Rayburn.

Witnesses: TBA.

EPA sued over algae policy

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07/22/2008
News-Press
Bill Cotterell

Bill Cotterell-News-Press

Five environmentalist organizations sued the federal government Thursday, demanding new measurable standards for pollution-fueled algal blooms in Florida waterways. New standards could go a long way in reducing pollutants blamed for Southwest Florida's environmental failures - contaminations that have led to mounds of odorous red drift algae on tourist beaches, fish kills and the closure of a Fort Myers water plant clogged by algae.

Attorney David Guest of Earthjustice said the case could have national implications. He said most states have only vague limits, so the lawsuit seeks to make the Environmental Protection Agency set measurable numbers on nutrients that cause algae.'It's like having a speed limit on an Interstate highway that says, 'Safe For Existing Conditions,' instead of 65 or 70 miles an hour,' Guest said. 'There have to be numeric limits.'The lawsuit says Florida has only a 'narrative' water-quality standard, which states, 'In no case shall nutrient concentrations of a body of water be altered so as to cause an imbalance in natural populations of aquatic flora and fauna.'Therefore, the lawsuit said, 'there is no measurable, objective water-quality baseline against which to measure progress in decreasing nutrient pollution' or violations of clean-water standards.'In Southwest Florida, the lawsuit would require numerical standards for nitrogen and phosphorous, two pollutants tied to the red drift algae that kept tourists from Sanibel and Fort Myers Beach and has hurt Lee County's $2 billion-plus tourism industry since the winter of 2003.'It is causing enormous damage to the economy,' said Andrew McElwaine, president of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

McElwaine said the toxic algae also is contributing to hundreds of dead fish that have washed up on Gulf beaches.'When that algae dies it absorbs the oxygen in the water and kills fish, shellfish and the species that depend on them,' he said.Earthjustice, a national environmental-law organization, represents the Florida Wildlife Federation in Tallahassee; Conservancy of Southwest Florida in Naples; Sierra Club Florida in St. Petersburg, Environmental Confederation of Southwest Florida Inc. in Sarasota; and St. Johns Riverkeeper of Jacksonville. The lawsuit was assigned to U. S. District Judge Robert Hinkle in Tallahassee's federal court.

Plaintiffs said algal blooms caused by runoff contaminants are fouling beaches, lakes, rivers and springs across Florida - posing a threat to swimming and public health. McElwaine said a drinking water plant at Olga, on the Caloosahatchee River near Fort Myers, has been temporarily closed at least three times because of pollutants.

In Washington, EPA spokeswoman Enesta Jones said the agency has not been served with the lawsuit.'It's a priority for EPA to have states adopt science-based numeric standards to control nutrient pollution,' EPA Assistant Administrator for Water Benjamin H. Grumbles said in a statement.

The lawsuit said EPA made a finding that 'nutrient pollution is the leading cause of impairment in lakes and coastal waters and the second-leading cause of impairment of rivers and streams.' It said the Gulf of Mexico also is affected.

Guest, the Earthjustice attorney, said EPA gave Florida a 2004

deadline to limit nutrient pollution but the state has not acted - and the EPA is supposed to act when states don't. The environmental groups said the EPA recently approved a plan that would only 'propose' limits by 2011.'Each time an extension is granted, it essentially guarantees these contaminants will continue to flow into our rivers, lakes and oceans - endangering our wildlife and threatening our economy,' said Manley Fuller, president of the Florida Wildlife Federation.

In a letter to the EPA before the lawsuit, Earthjustice said the agency admitted excessive levels of nitrogen and phosphorous are a cause of blue-green algal blooms. Earthjustice said the Olga plant serving 30,000 Fort Myers residents was shut down because algae on the Caloosahatchee 'threatened the plant's source water supply.''Florida has been plagued with red tide blooms and bluegreen algae that have caused massive fish kills and threats to people's health,' said Frank Jackalone of the Sierra Club. 'It's time we do something about it.'The Conservancy's McElwaine said 'we have drinking water plants being shut down because the water is poisoned with algae.'It is time for the federal government and Florida to step up to the plate and enforce clean-water standards for the public,' he said. 'Citizens shouldn't have to resort to lawsuits to get the government to make sure they have clean water but, unfortunately, that's what we have to do today.'Southwest Florida lawmakers also have tried to tighten regulations at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which they say isn't doing enough to curb pollution from wastewater plants.

Raw sewage spilled, leaked and emitted foul odors from at least a quarter of Lee's wastewater plants over the past five years, according to a News-Press investigation.

- The News-Press staff writer Pedro Morales contributed to this report.

Editorial EPA must set algae standards

07/22/2008
News-Press

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The water quality of our region matters. Southwest Florida is a place that values its environment and that every year woos tourists and new residents to come down and partake in our piece of paradise.

Our current residents deserve the highest quality of life without threats to our drinking water, public health, state of our beaches, and recreation such as swimming, fishing and boating.

Local, state and federal officials have made efforts to better our water quality: crafting fertilizer ordinances, ramping up Everglades restoration efforts with the proposed U.S. Sugar deal, and trying to increase the money that goes toward research of red tide.

Red drift algae, fertilizer runoff and nutrient-rich deposits from Lake Okeechobee have taken a toll on our waterways and our economy.

Lee County has lost more than $2 billion since the winter of 2003.

So, that's more the reason why the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should act to create measurable standards for pollution-fueled algal blooms in our water.

The lawsuit by five environmental groups, if successful, would compel the EPA to act, since the state hasn't. The agency may propose limits by 2011, but that's not soon enough.

The groups are the Florida Wildlife Federation, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Sierra Club Florida, Environmental Confederation of Southwest Florida Inc. and St. Johns Riverkeeper.

Urgency is critical, and if the federal government is not willing to act when the state failed, then the lawsuit seems to be the last resort.

The people of Florida deserve better.

Florida's wettest area is still in a drought

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News-Press
Hiraki, Ryan

But rainfall somewhat relieves a parched Southwest Florida
By Ryan Hiraki • News-Press

Lee County has started to receive above-average rainfall, but the amount varies among different communities.

The only official rainfall number for Lee County is reported from Page Field in Fort Myers, by the National Weather Service. So far this month, 12.14 inches of rain have fallen there, almost half of the 28.25 inches received the entire year.

But rainfall counts elsewhere in Lee County exceed those of Page Field.

Volunteers known as the Community Collaborative Rain, Hail & Snow Network measure rain at their homes and report it to Colorado State University, where the numbers are posted on the Web.

The wettest community in Lee so far this month? Bonita Springs, with 14.44 inches of rainfall collected, according to the network.

The driest, of all the areas where a volunteer checked his or her rain gauge everyday through Sunday afternoon, is the northeast area of North Fort Myers, with 7.48 inches.

Morgan Palmer, a network volunteer and a meteorologist with NBC-2, has said it is normal for different areas to get different amounts of rainfall. It's the nature of Southwest Florida's subtropical climate.

"Marco Island, with the 6 to 8 inches they had (Thursday), might as well have had a tropical depression," he said. "Lee County and Collier County are the two wettest counties in the state right now, with Lee having drought index of 8 and Collier at 9. In the spring, Lee was in the 600s."

The drought index runs from 0 to 800 with no set numbers determining what constitutes a drought, because ground saturation affects conditions, according to the Florida Division of Emergency Management. But Southwest Florida is in its second year of drought, the division warns.

John McMichael, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service, supported Palmer's theory of differing rainfall counts, and said he doubts faulty rain gauges have anything to do with the differences.

"You can have storms setting up along the coast, you can have it farther inland," he said.

Typically, through this time in July, Page Field records about 5.91 inches of rain. Last year, less than 3 inches fell there. That means the rainfall numbers are twice as high as the average and four times as high as last year's totals through this point in July.

The recent rain "is good news for us, that's for sure," said Brian Lamarre, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service. "That's good, especially when we're in drought conditions."

The rain was constant last Tuesday, so much so that Tim Mann, a

principal at Metron Surveying & Mapping LLC near Page Field, said most of his workers were back at the office by noon.

"It was unusual for it to be raining in the morning and all through the day," said Mann, knowing that the rain tends to come in the middle of the afternoon during the summer. "The retention pond's full around back, and the ditches have been running (with water) all day."

Ola Alhuneid, owner of the Middle Eastern Grocery at Boy Scout Drive and U.S. 41, is happy to see the rain providing relief to the once-parched region.

"We needed the rain earlier too, but it's still much better than last year," she said.

And there's still a ways to go to officially get out of the drought, Palmer said.

The area needs more than 30 inches of rain in July, August and September to overcome the drought, he said.

"But we don't want it to come all at once," he said. "That's when flooding becomes a problem."

Dolly no threat, but a reminder to be prepared nonetheless

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

South Florida Sun-Sentinel Editorial Board

Storm forms quickly in western Gulf of Mexico

Dolly formed in a flash, so to speak, and this storm is a reminder to all living along coastlines that we are nearing the peak time for hurricanes.

The tempest flared over the Yucatan Peninsula early this week. Forecasters expect the storm to make landfall on the Texas or Mexico coast Wednesday as a Category 1 hurricane.

Dolly's no threat to South Florida, but the lesson for us is clear. Be prepared and watchful. Not all storms form far away, off the coast of Africa. Those that form closer to our shores don't leave a lot of time to stock up on supplies.

Tropical storm season expected to be as busy as 2005, just not as strong

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Stuart News

Stuart News

TREASURE COAST — The tropical storm season this month could match the record-setting number of storms from July 2005, though it may not pack the same punch, forecasters said.

"It's been active, but it hasn't been like 2005," said Bart Hegenmeyer, senior meteorologist for the National Weather Service's Melbourne office. "It's still early, though. We'll have to keep watching."

Six storms formed in July 2005, with Hurricane Dennis making landfall in Florida. But none of this month's four storms have reached the Sunshine State.

Tropical Storms Cristobal and Dolly are bypassing the Treasure Coast for the Carolinas and the Caribbean, said Tony Carper, Indian River County Emergency Management director. The National Hurricane Center also has alerted weather watchers for a developing wave currently inland above the coast of western Africa.

"The good news is something forming this far east would have very little chance of making it across the Atlantic," Carper said.

It's unusual for the National Hurricane Center to call attention to a storm so far east, Carper said.

"The center usually waits until the systems reach water before they talk about them," Carper said. "I guess this goes to further prove what an interesting July this is becoming."

Neither Carper or Hegenmeyer said this month's storms indicate what the rest of the hurricane season will deliver.

Florida Friendly Gardening

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FloridaGardner.com

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A few months ago the topic of gardening despite Florida's drought would have made a good presentation. Seeing as we have been blessed with regular rain fall throughout the last few weeks, I adjusted my topic a little. Today I am going to talk about Florida Friendly Gardening. Florida One of the major reasons for this is Storm-water runoff. Rain falls on yards, roads and parking lots then washes into ponds, lakes and canals carrying pollutants like fertilizers, pesticides, dirt and oil. Scientists have discovered that fertilizers and pesticides from residential areas are serious threats to the health of Florida's waters. This is why Lake Okeechobee is in such rough shape. Run-off from the ranches and sugar plantations has polluted it. When runoff contains nitrogen from fertilizers, algae can become so abundant that marine grasses are smothered, oxygen is depleted and fish kills may result. In some water bodies phosphorus is often the nutrient responsible for algae blooms. Toxic substances, such as home and yard pesticides, can damage reproduction in animal life which lives on, in and around bodies of Florida water. If you are a concerned about this, you can cooperate with local, natural conditions, rather than fight against them. That is the idea behind Florida Friendly Gardening. With the price of clean water and energy rising, people are making conservation a top priority again. More gardeners are becoming interested in landscaping with native and other beneficial trees, shrubs and ground covers. Homeowners are choosing plants that blend beauty and environmental benefits. People are selecting safer alternatives to chemicals used indoors and out. And many of these benefits to the environment also save time and money while enhancing our Florida lifestyle.

Soil

In much of Florida, soil and sand are basically the same. Typical Florida soils allow rapid, downward movement of water and nutrients. Thus, they dry out quickly and are not compatible with plants having high water and nutritional needs. Sandy soils allow leaching of chemicals into groundwater and waterways.

The simplest way to avoid these problems in the landscape is to use only plants that are compatible with the site. If you want a vegetable or rose garden, you will need to modify, or amend, the soil by adding organic matter, such as compost, to the planting bed. This will retain moisture, provide nutrients and attract beneficial organisms like earthworms.

It is helpful to have your soil's pH tested. Sandy coastal areas are usually alkaline or high in pH, and inland areas are usually acid or low in pH. Many lots contain fill dirt from other areas, so site specific pH testing is a good idea. Knowing your soil's pH will help you make better use of plant guides which provide this information along with other requirements of the plants listed. Many plants will tolerate a wide pH range, but will do best when planted in the right soil. You can test your soil yourself by buying a tool like a

When planning your landscape be aware that different areas on the same property may have different soils because of imported fill. Another factor in your soil may be the presence of a sub-layer of hardpan, rock or shell, which we have in our yard and makes planting certain sections of it impossible. This is one reason to

examine your soil to a depth of about 18 inches before making final plant selections.

Plant Selection

Plant selection is an enjoyable part of landscaping. Florida's climate is home to many varieties of plants, and many are grown by local plant nurseries.

The plants you select determine the wildlife value of your yard, the level of maintenance required, how much money you'll be spending on water or electricity to run a pump, and how much fertilizer or pesticide may be required. Plant selection also determines how long your landscape will last. For example, fast-growing plants often have a shorter life-span than slower-growing species. Some guidelines for selecting Florida Friendly Plants:

Plants already on your property, particularly native plants, may already be well-suited to your yard and should be kept if they appear healthy. Avoid disturbing the root zone (at least to the drip line) of these plants or driving over them with heavy vehicles. Saving existing plants reduces costs and leaves valuable wildlife habitat undisturbed.

Select plants which include suitable native plants. Once native plants are established in the right location, they require little, if any, supplemental water, fertilizers or pesticides.

If you don't want to continue irrigating after plants become established, select drought-resistant plants that are right for your soil.

Consider the critters. Providing native flowering and fruiting plants can bring birds and butterflies into your yard. Florida is a stopover for many migrating and wintering butterflies and birds.

Limit the number of showy plants that require high water and maintenance, and place them where they'll have the most visual impact.

Don't plant noxious, invasive species such as Brazilian pepper, Australian pine and Melaleuca trees. These plants should be removed from your yard as they crowd out native plants and are threatening Florida's ecosystems and wildlife. Several other plants commonly used in landscaping are starting to take over here. A few examples are wedelia (a ground cover), carrotwood tree, Java plum and Chinese tallow.

Diversify. Create a mosaic of trees, shrubs, ground covers, native grasses and wildflowers. Monocultures, which are the same species of plant used en-mass, are prone to disease and insect infestation and do not provide the same benefits to wildlife as a diverse plant community.

Turf areas should be designed for easy maintenance. If the grass dies or you aren't using it for play or other activities, consider replacing it. Good alternatives are ground covers or landscaped beds. Ground covers can be especially useful in shady areas where turf may not thrive. Fertilizing, watering, mowing and pesticide use will be reduced.

Don't give in to planting fast-growing plants. These kind of plants

are usually exotics, invasive and require more pruning which results in more yard waste. Lush, green shoots also attract pests. Slower-growing plants may take longer to fill in your landscape, but they'll last longer and create less work.
Native Plants

Some Florida native plants may be hard to find at your local garden center, but demand is growing so the supply will follow. In the meantime, here are some tips on finding native plants that may be suited to your yard:

Visit parks and preserves to view native plants in their natural setting. Undisturbed acreage near your home may work to. See what grows well in your area. Take photographs to show to knowledgeable people for later plant identification, or carry a good field guide that includes color photos.

Visit the library and book stores, particularly those at botanical gardens, to find good reference books on Florida native plants.

Attend meetings and field trips organized by the Florida Native Plant Society. Members often swap plants and seeds, as well as knowledge on what grows best in your area. Attend meetings and field trips organized by the Florida Native Plant Society or other horticultural organizations. (Native Plant Sources).

When buying your plants, order from a nursery or ask your local garden center to order the native plants you want. Provide a list with scientific names, specifying the size of plant you want.

If the plants you want are not available through local garden centers, visit plant nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants

Consider hiring a landscape architect or contractor who specializes in native plants to survey your yard make landscaping suggestions. This may be a wise investment, particularly if you are planning major changes.

Attracting Wildlife

Florida's urban development is replacing native wildlife habitat. As our communities expand, we see the loss of birds and other wildlife. For example critters that were in our neighborhood, but have been chased out by new construction include river otters, foxes, and armadillos.

A Florida Yard provides habitat for desirable plants and animals that have been displaced by development. Think about adding a few features for wildlife to bring birds, butterflies and beneficial insects such as lady bugs and praying mantis into your garden.

Basically, wildlife will be attracted by food, water and cover. You can create a wildlife habitat in your yard by:

Providing food in the form of plants that bear seed, fruit, foliage or flowers that you are willing to plant to benefit birds, caterpillars and adult butterflies. Berries, fleshy fruits, nuts and acorns are treats for wildlife.

Adding water sources such as a pond or a bird bath.

Maintaining for the birds areas that include a tree canopy, smaller understory trees and shrubs, and grasses or flowers, especially those that are allowed to go to seed.

Be aware that pets that are allowed to wander outside will defeat any efforts you make toward attracting wildlife. For example cats and birds or dogs and squirrels.

Pesticides used in the landscape will reduce insect populations, an important food source for birds and frogs. Some chemicals will poison birds that eat the poisoned insects.

Caterpillars on plants may be the larval form of butterflies. Each species of butterfly lays its eggs on a particular species of plant. For example, the rare Atala Hairstreak butterfly lays its eggs on coontie plants.

Butterflies of different species are attracted to specific flowering nectar plants such as native wildflowers, shrubs and vines.

Dead trees should be left in place if they don't threaten structures or people. Birds use dead trees for perches, nesting and sources of insects for food.

About Preventing Runoff

Here's a basic concept of a Florida Friendly Yard: Rain that falls in your yard should soak into your yard. Rain is the best source of water for your plants, and reducing runoff will help protect the waterways. Retaining rainfall long enough for it to percolate through the soil is the ideal scenario.

Downspouts

If the roof of your home has rain gutters, make sure the downspouts are not aimed toward a paved surface. Turn downspouts into areas with plantings that will make better use of rainfall than letting it run down the driveway and into a storm drain. Be sure to choose plants for these areas that can adapt to having more water, and be sure water doesn't pool next to buildings.

Rain Barrels

Large, plastic rain barrels are available at home and garden stores. The barrel looks like a garbage can, but has a hole in the top where a roof downspout can fit snugly.

A valve near the bottom allows you to fill a watering can or connect a hose. These barrels are great for hand-watering, and they aren't mosquito-attracters as long as the downspout fits tightly. The barrel is not unsightly, and a four-foot shrub could easily shield it from view.

Porous Surfaces

Whenever possible, use bricks, gravel, turf block, mulch, pervious concrete or other porous materials for walkways, driveways or patios. These materials allow rainwater to seep into the ground helping to filter pollutants and reducing the amount of runoff from your yard.

Maintaining Your Florida Yard

Caring for Florida starts with caring for your yard.

The perfect yard is less than ideal if caring for it causes you to pollute. A good landscape design incorporating the right plants in the right places reduces maintenance requirements and costs. For most yards it will be necessary to perform some maintenance, including:

Composting

Fertilizing

Watering

Mowing, Edging, Pruning, Raking

Mulching

and

Pest Management

Pollution-free yard maintenance is easy when plants are selected with that in mind. If your existing landscape is too much work or requires maintenance that pollutes, you should consider changing some plants in your yard.
Composting

Many people have been taught that plants require fertilizer for proper nutrition. Plants do need nutrients, but they don't necessarily need fertilizer. Plants use their leaves to make food from sunlight, water, carbon dioxide and nutrients. Nutrients in the soil are necessary for structure, regulating metabolism, growth and reproduction. Some key nutrients for plants include nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, zinc, magnesium, iron and manganese.

If a plant is appropriate for the soil and site where it is located, it may not require additional nutrients from fertilization. Fertilizers are generally used to achieve a specific goal: more or larger blooms, faster growth, greener leaves or more fruit. If one of these is your goal, you basically have three choices: using compost, applying packaged fertilizer or applying a specific mineral, such as iron.

A great way to improve your soil is by adding compost, which can be made from partially decomposed yard or kitchen waste. Adding compost will:

Improve soil structure, texture and aeration and increase the soil's capacity to hold water;

Help loosen compacted soils and bulk-up loose soils;

Promote soil fertility and stimulate root development in plants;

Create a favorable environment for microorganisms and larger creatures, such as earthworms -- nature's "soil builders".

Generous amounts of compost frequently added to the soil surface can replace petroleum-based, nitrogen fertilizers. And unlike quick-release fertilizers, nutrients in compost are released

slowly so landscape plants can use them. Also, composting or mulching with yard wastes helps reduce the amount of stuff that must be hauled to the landfill.

Composting is easy, just place leaves, grass clippings and small cuttings behind shrubs or in a hidden corner of the yard and letting nature take its course. I you want to go big time homemade or store bought compost bins are another option to consider and will allow you to easily compost kitchen waste, such as vegetable and fruit scraps, egg shells and coffee grounds.

Some tips on composting:

Bins aren't necessary but they help keep piles neat, retain heat and moisture, and prevent complaints from neighbors. The minimum recommended size is three feet square by three feet high.

Proper moisture is necessary for microorganisms to compost the material. Covering the pile helps retain moisture and prevents the pile from getting too soggy when it rains. You should not be able to squeeze water from the material produced at the bottom of the pile.

Heat is important in composting, so a sunny location is better than a shady one.

Combining different materials, such as grass clippings and leaves, in the pile can help achieve the right proportions of carbon and nitrogen for effective composting. Always bury kitchen waste in the pile to discourage pests and to prevent odor from rotting fruit and vegetables.

Generally, for fastest composting, the pile should be turned with a pitchfork or stirred on a weekly basis in warm weather.

Never place meat, animal fat, dog or cat feces or dairy products in the compost pile.

Fertilizing

If compost is not available or if you need to fertilize, a basic fertilizer that contains slow-release, water-insoluble nitrogen and other essential nutrients is the most environmentally safe and cost-effective alternative. At least 30 percent of the nitrogen in the fertilizer should be listed as water insoluble.

When shopping for fertilizer, you will usually see three numbers like 6-6-6, 15-0-15, or 16-4-8 on the front of the bag. The first number refers to the percent of nitrogen content, the second number refers to phosphorus and the third refers to potassium. Read the label to find out if other important nutrients are included. This is not much more difficult to do than reading the nutrition facts on a box of crackers.

If possible, the first and third numbers (nitrogen and potassium) should be the same. Recommended blends include 12-5-8 for plants such as citrus, avocado, raspberry, blackberry or Muscadine grapes. 8-4-8 for Palms, Ixoras and other ornamentals, and 10-60-10 to encourage blooms on flowering plants. Try to select a fertilizer containing at least 30 percent slow-release, water-insoluble nitrogen and only use fertilizers if

absolutely necessary.

Avoid using fertilizers that contain weed killer or insecticide. These chemicals should be used only as a last resort when environmentally-friendly pest control fails.

Fertilizer is most often required for turf areas that have higher nutritional needs. If the lawn just won't green up, even after a good rain, first try applying chelated iron or iron sulfate instead of a complete fertilizer. An iron deficiency may be causing the color issue.
Three common types of lawn grasses in Florida are Bahia, St. Augustine and Bermuda grass. Bahia requires the least amount of maintenance, but it is not salt-tolerant. Bahia also is prone to damage by mole crickets. St. Augustine is used in coastal areas because it is salt-tolerant, but it requires more fertilizer and water. It also can be prone to pests, such as chinch bugs. Bermuda, which is used on golf-course greens, requires the most fertilizer, pesticides and water, plus careful mowing. Because it requires intensive maintenance, it is not recommended for home landscapes.

When applying fertilizer use a maximum of one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet twice a year -- once in March again in September. Or you can apply one-half pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet four times per year - March, May, September and early November.

Watering

Many Floridians water too much. Over watering depletes our water supply, makes plants pest prone, and adds to storm-water runoff. Choose drought-resistant plants, especially Florida natives, and plant them in the right spots. Group plants according to their water (and light) needs to simplify irrigation. Do not irrigate turf, trees and shrubs the same. The biggest problem I hear people having is with their oleanders and bougainvilleas refusing to bloom. Only to find out they are fertilizing and watering the heck out of them when they should not be feeding or watering them at all. Oleanders are popular in the desert town of Las Vegas because they thrive on abuse and scant watering.

By clocking back an irrigation system to once a week when there has not been any rain, you can reduce water bills, fungal diseases and mowing. Remember, the more you water the faster your lawn grows and the more it needs to be cut.

If you have an automatic sprinkler system, install a rain shut-off device or sensor that will override the system when enough rain has fallen.

Water in the early morning between 4 and 7 a.m. -- this is the best time because temperature and wind speeds are low and evaporation is reduced. Also, grass will be less susceptible to fungus if water is applied at the time dew normally forms.

For grass: Apply 1/2-inch to 3/4-inch of water when the grass shows signs of distress -- turning bluish-gray or leaf blades folding. Don't apply more water until symptoms reappear.

With gradual reductions in irrigation plants can tolerate less

water. Some people use no irrigation, yet have healthy plants -- me for instance. Water less in cooler months (November-March), and turn off automatic systems in the summer if rainfall is consistent.

Mowing, Pruning and Raking

Trimming some plants can help enhance the beauty of your Florida Yard. This is also an area of maintenance where you can reduce the workload by doing things the environmentally friendly way.

For example, if you've selected slow-growing plants, the amount of pruning will be reduced. Also, less pruning is required if plants are placed so that when they mature, they don't grow over walkways, driveways or against buildings. If your yard isn't grass intensive, less mowing is an obvious work, time and fuel saver.

Most St. Augustine and Bahia turf grass should be kept at a minimum height of three to four inches and longer in the shade. If cut shorter the plants will be stressed. Each mowing should remove no more than one-third of the leaf blade, and the clippings should remain on the lawn to decompose.

Mulching mowers cut grass into smaller pieces, speeding decomposition -- I alternate between using the chute on my lawn mower and blocking it to use the recycler feature.

Grass clippings can also be mixed with leaves and twigs to create mulch that provides nutrients for your plants.

Many Floridians avoid having deciduous trees in their yards because fallen leaves require raking. But deciduous trees help reduce energy costs by shading the house in summer and allowing sunshine to heat the house in winter when their leaves fall. Don't rake under trees because the dropped leaves are good mulch for the plant.

Collecting leaves and pine needles by raking provides a source of mulch that is free. If your yard generates more leaf mulch than you can use, compost the material or share some with a neighbor. When pruning trees and shrubs, toss small cuttings into a compost pile or behind a shrub to avoid putting piles of brush out for trash collection.

Mulching

Applying a layer of mulch around trees, shrubs, plant beds and on any exposed soil area will reduce water loss, control weeds and prevent runoff.

Some Facts about mulch:

A 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch around most plants reduces evaporation from the soil's surface, moderates soil temperatures and suppresses weeds.

Mulch can replace turf or ground covers in areas that are difficult to mow, irrigate or maintain. Mulches also can be used in shady areas where plants will not grow.

Mulch requires no maintenance, except for occasional additions

and weeding.

Use mulch that originates in your own landscape by using leaves, pine needles, grass and shrub clippings. Avoid using cypress mulch because it depletes cypress wetlands.

Mulch can provide a design element in your landscape, adding a contrast of color and texture that complements plantings.

Reduce the chances of rot by avoiding piles of mulch against plant stems or trunks. Citrus trees are particularly prone to rot from this. Give a 3-4″ clear space around tree trunks.

Avoiding Pest Problems

Know which plants can tolerate the conditions in your yard and plant them. Concentrate on pest-resistant varieties.

Go easy on water and fertilizer. Over watering and over fertilizing cause excessive growth, making them vulnerable to insects and disease

Mowing grass too short and severely shearing trees and shrubs weakens them, inviting pests. Do not hurricane cut your palms. Mow grass to the proper height and prune selectively. Remember, leaves are necessary to produce food for the plant.

If You Have a Lawn Care Service

Get their cooperation to:

Monitor for pests rather than having them apply sprays routinely.

Use chemical pesticides only when less-toxic methods fail and post a sign to alert neighbors that chemicals have been applied.

Apply slow-release fertilizer, and only if fertilizer is needed.

Avoid fertilizers containing weed killer or insecticide.

Leave grass clippings on the lawn and use other yard waste as mulch or compost.

Everglades Development
07/22/2008
WCTV-TV

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Earlier this year the Miami-Dade County Commission approved plans to build a Lowe's past the urban development boundary, which is set up to protect the Everglades.
Environmental groups gathered 2-thousand signatures in less than a month asking Governor Charlie Crist to intervene.

Damien Filer works with Progress Florida, the group that fought the development and hosted the petition signing.
Filer says, "People made their voices heard, they said we already have over a hundred Lowe's in Florida, we only have one Everglades, it's a national treasure and we want to protect it. "

Filer set up a link on Progress Florida's website directing people to send an email to the President of Lowe's.

The site is www.progressflorida.org

Repelling the Invasives

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07/21/2008
Calibre MacroWorld

From estuarine waters to the vast forests and valleys of public lands, to the gardens of everyday homes, plant species invasion is a major environmental problem in the United States and many other parts of the world.

It begins with the unwitting import, or the deliberate but ill-considered introduction, of a plant that comes from an entirely different ecosystem. Dropped into a new environment, without the natural controls of its own delicately balanced ecosystem, an exotic plant can choke out species native to an ecosystem, sometimes to the point of overwhelming them completely. In some cases, this invasion can threaten the very survival of native plants that are unique to the distinctive environmental conditions of a habitat.

The well-intentioned but environmentally unsound introduction of species to the American continent dates to the earliest years of European settlement, long before the biological and environmental consequences of such actions were understood. Full recognition of the invasive species problem in the national parks came in the 1960s with publication of the landmark Leopold Report, named for a prominent biologist who led a study of the parks' ecological management.

Today, the National Park Service is tackling the invasive species problem with Exotic Plant Management Teams (EPMTs). EPMTs were established to provide a framework and a first response to exotic plant invasions in parks. The 16 teams are stationed across the United States, each serving a regional network of parks. EPMTs are playing an increasing role as regional experts in vegetation and invasive species management. Teams also assist parks with vegetation management plans and environmental compliance. Over the last five years, EPMTs have managed or

treated more than 35,000 acres (some 14,000 hectares), worked in more than 200 parks, and treated more than 300 invasive plant species. Invasive plants are managed through a variety of control techniques -- including hand pulling, chemical, biological, and mechanical -- all with the objective of controlling the spread or reducing the density of growth.

The work of the teams has been bolstered by more than 25,000 volunteer hours in support of conservation. Likewise, the Student Conservation Association, a nationwide youth volunteer organization working to improve public lands, has been an important partner in this work to control invasive species.

The Park Service also enlists the aid of the youngest generation of park lovers to help control invasive species. A few months ago, NPS Director Mary A. Bomar was in Florida's Everglades National Park with First Lady Laura Bush and a group of schoolchildren. The students helped remove Brazilian pepper, an exotic invasive species common around south Florida. While there, the students became honorary Junior Rangers and assisted park staff in planting 15 native trees and shrubs in the area.

Car perks for government workers waste money

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

ISSUE: Local municipalities provide vehicles for government workers.

Government vehicles for employees who sit at their desks most of the day make no sense and is a practice that should be trimmed from municipal budgets throughout South Florida.

It's one thing to ask taxpayers to foot the bill for take-home-cars awarded to law enforcement officers and other government workers who travel frequently on the job. But a $21,324 Ford Crown Victoria for the North Lauderdale human resources director? A $27,559 Dodge Durango for the Davie town clerk? A $17,102 Jeep for a Sunrise employee who examines construction and site plans? Such perks are much too excessive and a good example of unaffordable luxuries at time of austerity.

Yet, the practice is common in South Florida. In Broward County, 28 out of 31 municipalities provide take-home vehicles, or car allowances, to 900 staffers and elected officials, costing taxpayers thousands of dollars annually for gas, insurance and maintenance, the South Florida Sun-Sentinel recently reported.

The number doesn't include take-home vehicles for police and firefighters, which is routine throughout the region. Car perks for law enforcement and emergency personnel are understandable, and in some ways benefit the community by making it easier for officers and firefighters to respond to emergencies. In the case of

police squad cars, their presence might also deter criminal behavior.

However, in these tight economic times, even those policies should be re-evaluated.

Municipalities, like Palm Beach County, that charge deputies a minimal monthly fee for such privileges should increase the amount to compensate for rising gas prices. And those that don't currently require a fee should implement one.

But for employees who don't travel regularly, the car perks should stop completely. These are tough economic times, and the money could be better spent in areas that would benefit the community.

BOTTOM LINE: Employees with desk jobs don't need cars. The practice must stop immediately.