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New Year Holds Potential For Damage To The Everglades

By JOHN W. ALLMAN, The Tampa Tribune

Published: December 18, 2007

A severe drought, forecast for 2008, could further damage the fragile Everglades ecosystem at a time when officials are scrambling to save the state's River of Grass.

The drought, spurred by a strong La Nina in the Pacific Ocean, could cut rainfall by 30 percent to 50 percent and keep winter temperatures 3 degrees to 5 degrees above normal, according to state climatologist David Zierden.

If that happens, experts say the Everglades could experience dangerously low water levels, which can drive wildlife away from their habitats, and extremely dry conditions, which make vegetation more susceptible to forest fires.

The drought also would impact Everglades restoration efforts.

"The severity of drought we're anticipating will highlight the impact that man's alterations have had to the environment," said Carol Wehle, executive director of the water management district. "You like to think about when Everglades restoration is done. ... The water will be better distributed during the rainy season, and you will have more water in the system during the drought."

Much of the work, however, is years away from completion because of a seven-year funding lag that has hindered the federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Approved by Congress in 2000, the plan was supposed to be a joint effort with state and federal agencies splitting the bill.

That hasn't happened. The South Florida Water Management District since 2005 has allocated more than \$1.8 billion for Acceler8, a collection of eight projects deemed too vital to wait for federal money to become available. Most of the projects have been designed and are either under construction or waiting to start construction.

The projects will accomplish two necessary goals: restoring natural habitats in areas such as Collier County by removing roads, canals and other manmade diversions and helping capture, treat and release cleaner water to flow into the Everglades.

The first significant federal money, about \$2 billion, isn't expected to be appropriated until next year and, at the earliest, wouldn't be available until 2009.

The projects, once completed, will help balance the wet and dry conditions that are vital to the Everglades' survival, said Ken Ammon, deputy executive director of the water management district.

That balance has been disrupted, particularly in South Florida, by residential, commercial and agricultural growth and development that changed how water flows into and through the Everglades.

Wehle said the drought will help highlight "the need for water for the environment just as much as water for man."

Extremely dry conditions don't just affect nature. South Florida residents will feel the pinch through stringent water usage restrictions.

The restrictions, which are already in place, will be extended and possibly increased, Ammon said.

"Every water user is essentially cut back," he said, ticking off a list covering everything from water used for landscaping irrigation to utility needs.

Water Release Worsened Woe

It's safe to say weather forecasters didn't see this coming.

In 2006, Zierden said, experts predicted an active hurricane season and a strong El Nino system in the Pacific Ocean.

Both conditions would have brought excessive rainfall to Florida. In anticipation of such, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers released water from Lake Okeechobee, Ammon said, to ensure that the lake's levee wasn't compromised if the forecast was accurate.

The forecast was wrong, and the rain stayed away.

Okeechobee is typically the backup for water shortages in South Florida. Water can be released from the lake to restore canals and protect drinking water from saltwater intrusion, Ammon said.

But the lake never recovered from the 2006 release. And lake levels are so dire - elevation is at a record-low 5 feet below average - that water can't be used to help replenish southern canals.

"It hinders the ability to improve the timing, distribution and quality and location of where we're moving the water," Ammon said.

Spotlight On Everglades Project

Ironically, the drought also may have a silver lining for the Everglades project.

For one, dry conditions are ideal for construction, Ammon said, and should prevent delays because of rain or flooding.

And the drought may make the public take notice.

"It will put a spotlight on the Everglades project," said Jake Varn, the former Department of Environmental Regulation secretary for Gov. Bob Graham from 1979-81, "because if the Everglades project ever gets completed, it will obviously provide more water to southeast Florida."

Graham, who as governor and later as a U.S. senator, led the push to make the Everglades a priority, said water restrictions and shortages should grab attention.

"I hate to rely on bad news to motivate people," Graham said, "but we may be about to get a big dose of it."

The news may be bad, but only if people don't heed the effects and work to find solutions, according to Col. Paul Grosskruger, Jacksonville district commander of the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Everglades projects, he said, may become the model for how people address water both here and elsewhere.

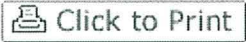
"All over the country, states and local governments are grappling with water shortages," Grosskruger said in a recent op-ed column for The Tampa Tribune. "Some are looking at every area where water is lost or wasted, and

considering whether there might be a better way. Many want to learn from our work on the Everglades."

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