

DROUGHT

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creating a warmer, dryer winter in South Florida. La Nina lasts until the end of March.

"It's a pretty safe bet that the next three months will be dryer than normal," Zierden said. "When you tie this with the normal seasonal cycle in Southwest Florida, and we have a traditionally dry spring, there's going to be water supply concerns persisting through the early summer."

That forced the water district to act.

Its governing board called for district-wide water restrictions, voting to curb lawn watering to once a week, in most areas. Landscape irrigation accounts for at least half of homeowners water use, Rodriguez said. The restriction is called "Phase 3" and has been enforced since Jan. 15.

"Our only response and frankly the most responsible response is to go into tighter water restrictions earlier this year," Rodriguez said. "At the end of the day we can all make individual choices that collectively can make an impact. Water conservation is the cheapest easiest way to stretch and protect your local water supplies."

For example, Fort Myers resident Joel Wolfson collects buckets of rain water run-off from his roof. Wolfson, an avid gardener, continues to enjoy healthy, lush foliage on his property. He said he's always collected water this way, not just during a drought.

"This was just last night's rain," he said, pointing out six large buckets in front of his house, filled to the brim. It had rained about half an inch the night before.

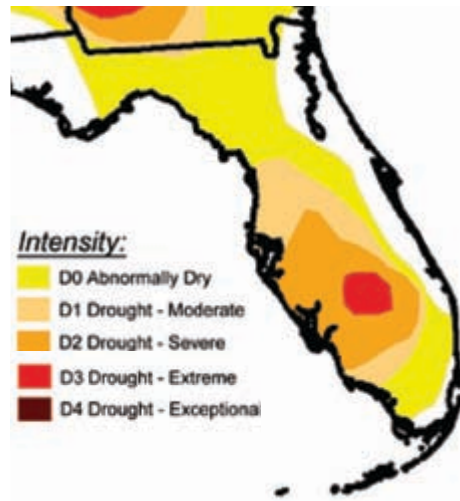
Rodriguez said Southwest Florida has seen 11 or 12 La Nina cycles in the past 76 years and all but one has resulted in below average rainfall.

In addition, he said water levels in Lake Okeechobee dropped to record lows last summer and were not replenished. Lake Okeechobee is the source of water for 500,000 acres of farmland in the Everglades Agricultural Area and is a primary back-up supply to more than five million South Floridians.

"Going into the winter and spring dry season with the levels already very low, and with the La Nina forecast, the outlook for it to rebound significantly is very bleak," Zierden said.

In December, the lake was already too low to replenish any of the districts water supply (10.16 feet above sea level), District officials said. They also predicted that the water level will continue to drop over the coming months to below Okeechobee's all-time recorded low of 8.82 feet above sea level, set just six months ago.

But just adding water restrictions are



not enough for one elected official.

"We're continuing our efforts as we have for the last several years to have the SFWMD and the core of engineers reevaluate how Lake Okeechobee and the entire water shed is managed," Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah said. He added that sugar cane fields between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades disrupt the flow of fresh water through the region.

Judah said he plans to support the restoration of those 430,000 acres of sugar cane fields in the middle of the state, to restore a flow way of freshwater from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. The result, he said, would significantly aid the recovery of underground water supplies called aquifers; those continue to shrink with diminished fresh groundwater to feed them.

"In the lower west coast specifically, groundwater is the main water source, and our groundwater monitoring wells are showing 2 to 4 feet lower today than this point last year," Rodriguez said.

Government leaders have been aggressive in steps to re-use waste water for irrigation and also in water storage programs, Judah said. 300 million gallons have already been stored around Corkscrew Road and Alico Road. That amounts to about a 100 day supply for Lee County, if water use were restricted much more than it is now. He will also ask SFWMD to pay half the cost of a \$250,000 plan to preserve and cap wells in Lee County. Uncapped wells cause a loss of about 12 million gallons of water per day, Judah said.

Fire hazard

As more water evaporates, forests begin to dry out as well, creating a fire hazard, said Michael Weston, Senior Forester for Lee, Collier and Hendry counties.

"Right now we're running about two to four weeks ahead of schedule on really drying out," he said. "And with the predicted dry weather we keep seeing from our meteorologists were looking for having possibly a bad fire season."

Land clearing burns, lightning and some outdoors activities, like riding ATV's in the woods or tossing lit ciga-

rettes onto a pile of dry twigs, may start a fire, Weston said; common sense often makes the difference.

"As we get going into May and June, when we typically get the main, natural fire season because of the lightning, we're going to be looking at fires that are going to be able to increase in size very, very rapidly."

The density and number of houses built in the recent real estate boom, especially in places like Lehigh Acres, also has Weston concerned. It's just more to burn.

"It's mainly houses that kind of have a woody setting next to them," he said. "Beneath the nice bay window that overlooks the woods, you wouldn't want to put a bunch of saw palmetto bushes."

That's because fire consumes them quickly and easily. For those homes bordering wooded areas, Weston recommends you keep at least 30 feet around your home clear, reserving it only for grass or decorative plants that don't burn quickly.

"If people give us space, there's a lot more we can work with," he said. "Then we can work on actually putting out the fire rather than just protecting structures."

Weston said government leaders, especially in Lee County, are working closely with them this year to insure firefighters are ready. But that's nothing new, said Judah.

"It's an ongoing collaborative effort we've had with the division of forestry for years," he said.

Tough on the environment

The ongoing drought will take its toll on agriculture in Florida as well, said Roy Beckford, Lee County agriculture and natural resources agent for the University of Florida.

"Florida is the winter (produce) basket of the United States," he said. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services says 70 percent of America's vegetables come from Florida during winter months. "Farmers understand droughts and how to maximize their scarce resources, but they too will suffer in an extended drought."

Also, salt water often replaces groundwater during a drought, and may find its way into ponds, lakes and wells, causing plants to die or under produce, and making water unpalatable to animals that may drink it, like cows. Beckford said drought is a strain on multiple levels.

"(The drought) effects all the systems of the environment," he said. "Without irrigation from rain, grasses will not grow and cows will not get the nutrients they need to grow and be sold, so our livestock will suffer. Also our forests will suffer because they use rainfall for survival. And the things that depend on forests will suffer. Florida panthers, bears, and all the other animals you can think of depend on water for food. That can add up to some of

water conservation tips

>> Water your lawn during the early morning hours when temperatures and wind speed are the lowest. This reduces evaporation and wasteful watering.

>> Use a shut-off nozzle on your hose to control the flow of water so you only use what you need. Remember to turn the water off at the faucet to prevent leaks.

>> Watering less frequently with the right amount of water is better than watering often with small amounts. Water thoroughly so water will reach deeper portions of the soil. Deeper grass roots will grow, and grass will stay greener and healthier. Most of the year, lawns only need one inch of water per week.

>> Know where the sidewalk ends and the yard begins. Position sprinklers so water lands on the lawn and shrubs and not on paved areas.

>> Rainfall provides enough water for Florida's native plants to flourish in the wild. Plant these same colorful, drought-tolerant natives in your yard so that your plants will survive during our drier months.

the problems you hear of: instead of wildlife staying in the wild were they belong, they come into the urban settings to find food and water. A small matter like five or six ponds drying up means that there is no fish, and what happens to those alligators who use that pond for food? They have to congregate in larger numbers in a smaller number of ponds."

Florida's water managers — individuals, government leaders, scientists, farmers and organizations like SFWMD — have an unusual challenge, and not just in drought years, said Mike O'Neill, national program leader for water resources with the United States Department of Agriculture.

"For the conditions that prevail typically in Florida, they're fairly sophisticated in their water management," he said. "I think Florida is ahead of the curve. The challenges that are faced down there come from increasing populations. The more houses you build, the more water you need to face all those demands. As agriculture and population rises, the need for water rises...and managing a complicated ecosystem that includes the everglades is a complicated issue.

"One of the biggest challenges that we face in agriculture in Florida and across the U.S. is that the demands continue to increase for the scarce water supplies. So many folks see agriculture as controlling a fairly large segment of the water supply. That competition creates pressure to move water to domestic or other uses. And that has a giant ripple effect that goes through everything from the economy to fighting fires." ■

Dial 511 for information about wildfires

System gives latest traffic conditions and road closures

Florida residents and visitors who need the latest information about the effects of wildfires on travel conditions statewide can call the Florida Department of Transportation's free 511 travel information service. The 511 service is available from cell phones and landlines statewide and provides real-time traffic conditions and road closures on all interstate highways in Florida and Florida's Turnpike.

The Florida Division of Forestry reported Jan. 4 that drought conditions are expected to worsen over the spring months, indicating a high potential for another active wildfire season.

Last week's closure of Interstate 4 in Polk County due to accidents involving fog and smoke is a serious reminder of the hazardous conditions that can result when wildfires occur, Florida Highway Patrol spokesman Sgt. Jorge Delahoz said.

"Wildfires can come up suddenly, and motorists may not be aware when their area is affected," Delahoz said. "By calling 511, they will learn of any trouble areas on their route, and can alter their plans if necessary."

When in low-visibility conditions, drivers should slow down, keep lights on low beam, and shouldn't use flashing lights unless pulling off the road. Another key, he said, is to minimize distractions.

"If you've got your radio on, turn it

off. Stay off the cell phone. You need to pay attention to what's going on," Delahoz said.

The I-4 closure indicates Florida residents are turning to 511 when unforeseen situations arise. The Central Florida 511 system logged 7,813 calls on Jan. 9, more than three times the 2,425 calls on the same date last year. The Statewide 511 system experienced a 40 percent increase in calls the same day.

In addition to the free 511 phone service, Florida residents can access real-time traffic information, traffic cameras, lane closures and emergency alerts on the Web at www.FL511.com. Regional information is available at www.jax511.com, www.511tampabay.com, www.southwestflorida511.com and www.southflorida511.com. ■

511 tips

>> Speak as clearly as possible and minimize any background noise, including radios and open windows.

>> Say, "other parts of the state" to transfer to Florida's regional 511 services.

>> Say, "help" for instructions.

>> Say, "next," "previous," "stop" or "repeat" to navigate through the phone menus more quickly.

>> Say, "main menu" at any time to start over.

>> Say, "feedback" to report congestion not already on 511.

>> Interrupt 511 at any time if you already know