

Counties flush dirty water into the ocean

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By **CARL HIAASEN**

One of South Florida's dirtiest secrets is the daily dumping of a half-billion gallons of sewage into the Atlantic Ocean.

The polluters are the governments of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, which use submerged pipes to pump the "minimally treated" wastewater two to three miles off our beaches.

It's a massive environmental crime that hasn't received much public attention, probably because it takes place underwater and out of sight.

But, at long last, the state Department of Environmental Protection is seeking to shut down the pipelines and halt the flow of urban sewage into the ocean. The DEP says the counties should recycle the wastewater instead of flushing it on the reefs (or what's left of them).

The official reaction of county leaders has been remarkably devoid of shame or remorse. They strongly oppose the DEP initiative, saying there's no conclusive evidence that a daily deluge of 500,000 gallons of crappy water seriously harms marine life.

In a pitch to Gov. Charlie Crist, Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez soberly asserted that "it is not in the public interest to spend a significant amount of money to eliminate discharges when we do not have the answer to what is really causing the impact to reefs."

If Alvarez truly believes that a steady torrent of sewage causes no damage to coral, he's staggeringly ignorant.

And he's not alone. Hollywood Mayor Mara Giulianti and Broward Mayor Josephus Eggleston Jr., too, have sent letters asking the DEP to produce proof that effluent is harmful to the sea.

Among reputable marine scientists there is little debate. Sewage contains higher levels of nitrogen, ammonia and other contaminants that are widely believed to promote algae blooms and disease in coral communities.

As coral formations die off, fish, lobsters and sea turtles lose critical habitat.

Your average second-grader has no difficulty understanding that polluting the ocean has unhealthy consequences, but Alvarez, Giulianti and Eggleston are slow learners.

Either that, or they're more worried about their own political hides.

Water treatment is costly, and the type of recycling system that state regulators are recommending for the three overcrowded counties might require \$2.7 billion in new infrastructure, according to one study.

That's a lot of money, yet it would translate to a relatively modest hike in monthly water bills, starting at about \$20 per household. Many families wouldn't mind paying that much to reuse wastewater, if they realized the unsavory alternative and what it means for the future.

Using the Atlantic as a toilet is immoral, but it's also idiotic, when you consider the growing water crisis in South Florida. The precious half-billion gallons that are sent out to sea every day could be recycled instead for irrigation, industry and even drinking, if sufficiently cleaned.

Each with two active pipelines into the ocean, Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade currently waste more water than any other counties. Broward flushes 191 millions per day, Palm Beach loses 108 million and Miami-Dade dumps 208 million.

It's obscene, and ultimately self-destructive.

The pipeline conflict between the counties and the state is an important test of Crist's declared commitment to a responsible environmental policy. The DEP, which became a pushover during Jeb Bush's tenure, has always had the authority to crack down on polluters; what's been missing is leadership and resolve.

Even in moving to plug the offshore pipes, the agency meekly stopped short of acknowledging a connection between sewage exposure and reef destruction.

The DEP said only that "the weight of evidence . . . calls into question the environmental acceptability" of ocean dumping.

No kidding.

Most Floridians are fiercely protective of their ocean, bays, gulfs and beaches, and man-made threats to those treasures aren't taken lightly. The opposition to offshore oil drilling, for example, remains intense from the Panhandle to the Keys.

Yet, with the exception of divers, fishermen and marine biologists, residents of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties are mostly unaware of how much sewage is being spewed right off the coastline, and who's doing it.

For obvious reasons, the municipal governments don't eagerly publicize their role in this foul enterprise.

How ludicrous for officials to contend that the effects are unknown. There's nothing harmless about polluting the Atlantic; it just happens to be the cheapest, easiest way to get rid of huge volumes of impure water.

Think about it.

If the stuff really weren't so bad, they wouldn't have sunk three miles of pipe to pump it away from the beach.