

Time to plug the pipes

Palm Beach Post Editorial

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It was a good idea 10 years ago and it is a good idea now: Close six pipes that discharge treated sewage wastewater into the Atlantic Ocean from Boynton-Delray Beach, Boca Raton and two locations in Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Florida's Department of Environmental Protection has suggested that Gov. Crist support legislation the department needs to speed closing the outfalls. DEP Secretary Michael Sole estimates that Southeast Florida now dumps more than 300 million gallons of treated wastewater into the ocean every day, or more than 110 billion gallons annually. So, the DEP will urge utilities to begin retooling to use treated wastewater for landscape irrigation, which saves drinking water and further cleans wastewater before it seeps back into the underground water supply.

The Boynton-Delray wastewater facility already is "moving in the right direction," the DEP's water resource management director, Janet Llewellyn, said in a letter to state Rep. Adam Hasner, R-Delray Beach. A short-term permit would allow the discharge to be pumped to an inland deep-injection well temporarily. Over time, the plant will increase treatment of wastewater and expand use of wastewater so that eventually the deep-well injection will stop.

Restricting deep-well injection is important, since some scientists believe that wastewater is migrating from deep wells onto ocean reefs. Delray Beach, Ms. Llewellyn said, has developed a master plan for reusing wastewater and is building golf course reuse facilities and seeking other large users.

Highly treated wastewater can be used not only for landscape and golf courses but also for agricultural irrigation, industry, toilet flushing, fire protection, decorative water features and ground water recharge. The DEP and the South Florida Water Management District have loans and grants available to help communities reuse water that now is being dumped into the ocean, where nutrients from the dumped water feed harmful algae and cause other damage to offshore reefs.

Florida, Mr. Sole said, already leads the nation in reusing wastewater. Unfortunately, the state also is a leader in putting reefs at risk. It's time to do without the outfalls.