

Ocean is no place for treated sewage

OUR OPINION: COUNTIES MUST FIND AND FUND ALTERNATE DISPOSAL METHODS

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As technically challenging and costly as an alternative may be, South Florida counties must stop dumping treated sewage into the Atlantic Ocean. Only three of Florida's 67 counties dispose of partially treated sewage in the ocean: Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

The water that laps at the beaches in these counties is bread and butter to their economies. So spewing some 300 million gallons of nutrient-laden refuse daily into those same waters is taking a huge gamble that a precious resource will be able to withstand this assault.

Coral reefs affected

The sewage outfalls range from one to three miles from shore in 90- to 100-foot-deep water. The counties claim that the outfalls don't cause enough near-shore pollution to warrant the expense of upgrading their sewage treatment systems to end the dumping. But the scientific findings on the outfalls' effect varies enough to cast doubt on the counties' claims.

Contrary to what the counties claim, there is some evidence that the partially treated sewage is not quickly dissipating and flowing north in the Gulfstream. Increasing algae blooms that suffocate coral reefs could be a byproduct of the dumping. Some research has found higher levels of ammonia, nitrogen and other chemicals in the water than have some government testing results. The counties should err on the side of caution before the day arrives when *all* the science could

point to the outfalls' damage to priceless reefs and fisheries.

Gov. Charlie Crist has told the counties to stop the dumping. Now the Legislature is lining up with the governor. Proposed legislation in the Senate would give the counties a decade to upgrade minimal sewage treatment plants to provide more comprehensive treatment. The sewage treated in plants today is too polluted to even be used to water lawns. An advanced treatment system would provide millions of gallons of gray water for irrigation and other uses.

The choice is clear

There is no arguing that the cost of converting to more advanced treatment systems would be in the billions of dollars and pose complications for disposing of millions of gallons of treated but undrinkable water every day. The Senate legislation, besides giving counties 10 years to make the switch, also would offer loans to the counties. Much of the cost would have to be paid through rate hikes. It is worth noting, though, that South Florida governments have low sewage fees compared to other metropolitan areas.

Do South Florida residents want to swim, fish and boat in clear water that shelters healthy reefs and marine ecosystems? Of course. The choice is clear. The counties must find ways to stop dumping treated sewage into the sea.