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State wants to end dumping of treated sewage into ocean

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Bacteria levels in treated sewage being pumped into the ocean off South Florida meet federal guidelines, but one government scientist admitted Wednesday he wouldn't want to swim in it.

"I'd prefer not to," Dr. John Proni, director of the Ocean Chemistry Division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, told the state Senate's Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee when asked if he'd feel comfortable swimming near the outfall pipes.

Six pipelines from Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties dump 300 million gallons of treated sewage a day about two miles offshore – some of it onto reefs that attract recreational divers.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection is hoping to eliminate the practice, which agency officials concede could take decades, and find other uses for the much-needed

water, such as watering lawns.

A first step is likely to be a request that state legislators mandate improved treatment of the sewage before it is dumped in the ocean.

"And if you improve the level of treatment, that puts you on the path to using that water for something else in the future," said Phil Coram, DEP deputy director.

Other short-term steps the Legislature could take include prohibiting new outfalls, limiting outfalls to current levels and diverting more treated sewage to water reuse projects.

Pipeline foes, including environmental and diving groups, claim the sewage is killing South Florida's reefs and could endanger the health of those who swim in it.

"The nutrients kill coral reefs and cause algae blooms," said Ed Tichenor, of Palm Beach County Reef Rescue.

"Every grade-school student knows that manure makes plants grow. It does the same thing on a coral reef."

Legislators say there is no quick fix to the problem.

"It has to be an extended process," said Sen. Nan Rich, R-Weston, a member of the committee. "In Broward, there is no place to put the water [that is now being discharged through the outfall]. And nobody knows the exact cost this will be to taxpayers."

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