

Irrigation May Solve Okeechobee Pollution

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WEST Palm Beach — The city of Okeechobee needs to get rid of some water. That way, it can get out of the hot water it's in with a couple of state agencies.

If the city can find one big landowner or several smaller ones willing to take some treated water from the ditch around its sewage treatment spray field, it can stop trying to dump the water into Taylor Creek through an illegal culvert. That agreement was reached Thursday during a meeting at the state Department of Environmental Regulation district office here.

Taylor Creek, a tributary of Lake Okeechobee, is a main target of the state's push to cut pollution in the lake, the

Kissimmee River and the Everglades.

DER and the South Florida Water Management District say water in the ditch is a lot cleaner than the manure-laden water in the creek because the treated sewage loses much of the nitrogen, phosphorus and bacteria it carries as it seeps through the ground. But they say all sources of pollution must be reduced, and the city either has to stop using the pipe or apply for a permit — with the understanding that it won't be easy to get.

"The less water that goes in there, the less comes out the other end into the lake," Scott Benyon, DER district supervisor, said.

Piping the water to citrus groves, cattle ranches and croplands would have a

bonus, agency officials said Thursday — the plan would be viewed as reuse of wastewater, meaning the district would have no regulatory power over it, and DER would put few restrictions on its use.

The agencies called Okeechobee on the carpet when it asked, for the second time in a year, to unplug the 15-inch culvert into Taylor Creek and let some water out of the ditch around the 310-acre spray field site north of town.

Okeechobee Public Utilities Director L.C. Fortner said the city will contact landowners and try to work out agreements to deliver irrigation water to them. One prospect cited was the Williamson Cattle Co., which has several thousand acres close to the spray field. ■



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