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Back-pumping into Lake Okeechobee has become necessary evil

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ISSUE: Back-pumping option

on the table again.

Water management officials need to tread carefully in the debate over back-pumping water into Lake Okeechobee.

The option presents a double-edged sword. It could secure drinking water and agriculture irrigation supplies, but at the risk of ushering pollutants into the lake. It is up for discussion today during a South Florida Water Management District workshop because, despite the rains that have quenched thirsty lawns, Lake O's water levels are still dangerously below normal.

The advantage of back-pumping is it would add as much as a foot to water levels, which would provide a margin of error during the next dry season. Perhaps even more crucial, it could rescue the agricultural industry — one that helps feed Florida's economy — from the brink of potentially catastrophic crop losses next year if the drought indeed persists.

Water management officials believe drought conditions will continue once the rainy season ends, so the need to back-pump is almost a foregone conclusion.

The critical question is when to start. The unfortunate answer is soon.

With September approaching, we're deep into the rainy season, when atmospheric conditions make back-pumping more efficient. Waiting much longer will remove back-pumping as a viable option, and we'll be left with no option at all to counteract a prolonged, crippling drought.

It is a sad reality that this route must be taken after the district spent millions of dollars — wisely — to clean contaminated muck out of the lake floor after plummeting levels left it exposed. Back-pumping could erode those water-quality gains, even if it's by a relatively modest amount.

But because adequate water storage facilities were not built by the time this historic drought arrived, back-pumping has emerged as a necessary evil. It must, though, be looked upon as a temporary solution to a water-management crisis that only sufficient storage can effectively reverse in the long-term.

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

The uncomfortable predicament should also serve as a reminder that water is not an infinite resource, and Floridians must become more conservation-minded, quickly. That makes year-round water restrictions even more essential, if for no other reason than to remind residents of their role in managing the crisis.

BOTTOM LINE: Sadly, it's a necessary evil

at this point.

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