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South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Farms pouring too much pollution into Everglades, report says

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

September 13, 2007

Everglades-choking pollution that flows off sugar cane and other agricultural fields decreased this year, but not by as much as required.

The amount of phosphorus leaving the 500,000 acres of farms south of Lake Okeechobee decreased 18 percent between May 2006 and April 2007, according to the South Florida Water Management District.

That was less than the 25 percent yearly decrease called for in Florida's Everglades Forever Act. The law mandates water treatment and changes to farming practices to reduce the influx of phosphorus, which comes from fertilizer.

This was the first time in 11 years that the region failed to meet the 25 percent standard, according to the district. The law stipulates that the region must meet the standard in at least one year out of a consecutive three-year period.

Sugar cane growers say they are doing their part to reduce phosphorus, but that this year's drought and pollution north of Lake Okeechobee make it harder to meet the requirements.

Phosphorus levels flowing into the lake have increased, and with less rainfall this year, growers south of the lake had to use more lake water for irrigation.

The district contends that the lake also continues to feel the effects of active hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005, which stirred up the muck-covered bottom and released more phosphorus.

"Until the lake problem is addressed, you are going to have more problems downstream," said Judy Sanchez, spokeswoman for U.S. Sugar Corp.

The influx of phosphorus in the Everglades fuels the growth of cattails, crowding out other plants and damaging the ecosystem.



The Legislature this year approved \$100 million for Everglades restoration north of the lake, intended to help build water storage and treatment areas to clean water before it flows south.

South of the lake, the district has turned 41,000 acres into pollution filtering storm-water treatment areas, helping clean up phosphorus that would otherwise end up in the Everglades.

"We are determined to continue to work to help farmers meet and exceed the target reduction next year," district Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann said in a release Wednesday.

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