

## **Builders will be ordered to avert pollution at sites New rules are intended to limit tainted water that flows from projects to lakes and streams**

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KISSIMMEE -- In a move that could have statewide implications, developers in parts of Central and South Florida soon will be required to do more to protect lakes and rivers from the polluted storm water that runs off their projects.

New standards could change the look of future developments ranging from the smallest neighborhood and shopping center to sprawling subdivisions and office parks. New projects would have greater expanses of green, more wetlands, larger stormwater ponds and tighter clusters of homes than developers currently offer, experts say.

The rules, which are expected to take effect by 2008, will apply to builders on land from Walt Disney World to Lake Okeechobee. They are intended to reduce contaminated rainwater that flows off new rooftops, streets and fertilized lawns into a vast network of lakes and streams, starting with the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. From there, water flows to Lake Okeechobee and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, which the state is paying \$200 Million to restore.

"The existing rules and regulations that we have in place today are not sufficient," said Carol Ann Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, which will work with builders to develop the new rules during the next 18 months.

"As we spend taxpayer dollars for restoring those water bodies, we should not perpetuate past practices that contributed to the degradation of those water bodies," she said.

Although the requirements initially will affect only south Orange, Osceola and several South Florida counties, regulators say the stricter standards ultimately are likely to be adopted by the state's other water-management districts and the Department of Environmental Protection.

"It is very, very important," said Linda Young, director of the Clean Water Network of Florida, a coalition of grass-roots groups. "Florida's had the attitude: 'Just build it today and worry about where the runoff, where the sewage, where the pollution will go later.' And it's really caught up with us. Our waters are gross and polluted all over the state."

The changes are meant to have two effects. The first is to get developers to hold back more water on their projects during heavy rains so it doesn't overflow Lake Okeechobee and force water managers to pump the polluted water into the coastal estuaries, harming fish and wildlife. The state plans to spend \$200 million to build new reservoirs and marshes to keep the runoff from swelling the largest freshwater lake in the Southeast.

"During the rainy season, if we exceed the capacity of Lake Okeechobee, then that water is discharged to the east coast and west coast [of Florida] and causes serious environmental degradation," Wehle said. "We're already in that situation today. Adding more water will just cause more harm."

The second goal is to reduce the level of phosphorus entering the lakes and rivers, regulators say. The phosphorus, which comes from products such as fertilizer, manure and motor oil, can cause algae blooms that suffocate fish. Water-management-district documents state a goal of 25 percent to 50 percent reduction in the phosphorus draining off new development, although officials say they are open to input from engineers and development consultants.

A group of Osceola developers is the first to begin working under the new constraints. In discussions with regulators about five new communities to go on the east side of Lake Tohopekaliga, the developers have orally agreed to build larger and deeper stormwater ponds that would hold more runoff for longer periods before it flows into the lake. They have also agreed in principle to protect corridors of wetlands and drier areas to filter out additional pollutants while giving wildlife greater room to roam undisturbed.

"It is the right thing to do," said John Adams, a Kissimmee planning consultant helping to design most of the Osceola projects. "We know the agencies are going to change the rules to make them stricter. We want to help them in the process and show them that development can accommodate it."

With less land to build on, developers will be forced to concentrate homes in smaller areas, but the larger stormwater ponds will give developers more waterfront property, Adams said. The rules probably will lead to more urban-style neighborhoods such as Baldwin Park and Celebration, which developers already are beginning to embrace throughout the region.

"The same designs that appeal aesthetically to the public happen to be the same type of designs that maximize environmental protection," Wehle said.

Next week, the water-management district will conduct a public workshop in Kissimmee to discuss the new requirements with local government officials, engineers and developers. The rules, which water managers say the district's governing board is sure to enact in some form, will apply to builders of projects of all sizes in south Orange, Osceola, Okeechobee, Highlands, Martin, St. Lucie, Glades, Hendry and Lee counties.

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