

State proposal would lower standards for canals

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Be careful out there. People are trying to mess with your water. If you let them, you'll regret it.

First it was the Broward County Commission's own environmental staff, which recommended lowering pollution standards so treated wastewater could be dumped into canals. Commissioner Kristin Jacobs and others pulled the plug on that dubious idea.

Now it's the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which is considering reclassifying the state's bodies of water. The result, among other things, could be a reduction in water-quality standards for Broward's 1,800-mile network of canals. Currently the standards are set at levels that, at least in theory, should make the canals fit for swimming and fishing.

The DEP says many bodies of water are misclassified now, and that makes it hard to direct resources to the waters that most need help. The agency says, for instance, that urban canals, built primarily for drainage, don't need to be as clean as natural streams or springs.

That sounds reasonable, but these canals aren't only for drainage. They also serve the important secondary function of replenishing underground supplies of drinking water. Plus, they feed into the Everglades, an ecologically sensitive environment, and the ocean, with coral reefs that could be harmed by water of inferior quality.

The County Commission is rightfully opposing the DEP proposal, with Jacobs again leading the charge. She says the state is just looking for cheap ways to dispose of sewage.

"Cheap" is not a word that should ever be associated with protecting Florida's precious and fragile environment. Cost savings are worth pursuing, but not at the expense of water quality.

The county is right to oppose the proposal, which could jeopardize the quality of drinking water.

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