

Water gushes into lagoon

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A St. Lucie County drainage project has resulted in thousands of gallons of fresh water being released into the brackish Indian River Lagoon without the required state permit, county and state officials said Wednesday.

The county is trying to drain 2 feet of water from the Savannas in preparation for installing a pipeline to move water from Indian River Estates to a storage reservoir north of Midway Road.



Fresh water from the Savannas runs through an culvert under Indian River Drive into the brackish Indian River Lagoon, which needs a balance of salt water.

In the process, water has gushed through an outflow culvert under Indian River Drive near Savannah Road, spreading chocolate- and reddish-brown water in both directions in the river, as far north as the Fort Pierce Marina.

The water is discolored by tannic acid from plants in the Savannas, a freshwater marsh that stretches from Fort Pierce to Jensen Beach.

Pipes have been delivered for the drainage project, but installation won't start for six months, County Engineer Mike Powley said.

"Trying to reduce something as big as the Savannas by 2 feet doesn't happen quickly," Powley said.

Dan Griffin, manager of the Savannas Preserve State Park, said he was unaware of the county's plan.

St. Lucie County officials blame the contractor for not getting a permit to dump water into the river. But the South Florida Water Management District doesn't plan to take action.

"County officials won't face a fine because the violation was a result of miscommunication," said Linette Trabulsy, water district spokeswoman.

The water district is still reviewing the county's permit request, Trabulsy said.

County officials requested a permit Jan. 17 through their contractor, who then started draining the site under the assumption it had the permission of the water management district, Trabulsy said.

Water managers visited the project site Wednesday and told workers to stop the discharge until the district finishes reviewing the request, Trabulsy said.

The agency has until Feb. 16 to issue or deny a permit.

Water in the Savannas flows to the north, through culverts under Midway and Savannah roads, aided by a canal stretching between the roadways. The water flows into a city of Fort Pierce retention pond, which helps filter impurities.

When the water is high, as it is now, excess water flows out of the pond, through a pipe under Indian River Drive, into the lagoon.

Officials with the state Department of Environmental Protection, meanwhile, are researching whether the project has the proper permit under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System, spokesman Stephen Webster said.

Kevin Stinnette, director of the Indian Riverkeeper group, said the permit allows for discharges during heavy rain.

"If it's not raining, there shouldn't be anything coming out of the pipe," he said.

Environmentalists said the discharge has reduced oxygen and salt levels in the water, making it unfit for saltwater creatures that live there.

Stinnette likened discharges from the Savannas into the river to those made from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie River.

"It just doesn't belong there," he said.

Fresh water alone can be "horribly bad for the lagoon," Indian River Drive resident Linda Nunn said. "The lagoon is a saltwater estuary for the most part. "Wildlife there depend on a certain level of salinity to survive."

She tests the water frequently for the Indian Riverkeeper group.