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Sewage infrastructure repairs put climate change center stage

Miami-Dade County to make critical repairs to county's aging sewer system

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MIAMI – A historic federal hearing on Monday related to Miami-Dade County's sewage infrastructure repair plan puts climate change center stage.

Under threat of a federal lawsuit and millions in fines for not complying with the Clean Water Act, Miami-Dade County and the EPA came to an agreement known as a "consent decree" to make critical repairs to the county's aging sewer system.

One group that did not consent, the Biscayne Bay Waterkeeper, the group filing suit in Federal Court.

On Monday, they will ask a judge to send both the EPA and the county back to the drawing board to come up with a new plan that includes protocols for climate change. That makes it precedent-setting say experts, because it is rare for an agreement of this kind to be challenged on the grounds of climate change. South Florida is on the front lines of this global issue.

The group said the consent decree did not include language regarding how the plan would accommodate for anticipated sea level rise and the powerful storm surges they can produce.

Environmentalists say that puts property, the environment and people at risk. They also argue it would be a waste of taxpayer money to invest \$1.5 billion on a plan that isn't "climate ready".

"We are actually suing the county and the EPA to beg them to do this right," said Caroline Lewis of The CLEO Institute, "spending billions in repairing a sewer that can't withstand a storm surge that is definitely coming doesn't make sense. It is throwing good money after bad."

The county has argued that while climate change may not be specifically addressed in the consent decree it is in their overall plans. In a written statement to Local 10's Christina Vazquez, Miami-Dade Water and Sewer spokeswoman Jennifer Messemer wrote, "The Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department (WASD) is implementing a systematic and responsible approach to improving the wastewater collection and treatment system during the next 15 years. The improvements made today and throughout the project will impact our current customers and future residents for decades to come. The upgrades will be driven by adherence to new regulatory requirements, addressing aging infrastructure, implementing the use of new technology, as well as factoring in the impact of climate change and sea level rise. The Consent Decree is only a part of the department's overall Capital Improvement Plan that will provide long-lasting enhanced benefits for the community, as we continue to deliver high-quality drinking water and wastewater disposal service to our more than 2.3 million customers on a daily basis."

Of specific concern for environmentalists is the county's aging wastewater treatment plant on Virginia



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levels expecting to rise 2-to-4 feet in the next 50 years, Slap said the county needs to make the plant more robust. That could include elevating it, building sea walls or moving it further inland to the site of new plant construction further inland.

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