Sea Level Rise Could Threaten Miami Sewage

MIAMI (AP) — Three major sewage plants in South Florida could be reduced to shrinking islands in less than 50 years due to climate change, according to a group of climate scientists.

The scientists believe rising sea level will threaten some of the region's most vital facilities. It will also flood land, streets and neighborhoods nearby, The Miami Herald reported Sunday.

The scenario was drawn up by five experts from the University of Miami, Florida International University and Florida Atlantic University retained by Biscayne Bay Waterkeeper. The clean-water advocacy group is challenging Miami-Dade's $1.5 billion plan to repair the county's troubled sewage system.

Most of the money would go toward repairing the county's aging, spill-plagued sewage system. Biscayne Bay Waterkeeper contends it would make more sense to move the plants to more protected inland sites.

"At some point, and I hope it's this year, Miami-Dade government and everybody has to start truly recognizing that we're in for it, that this is coming," University of Miami geology professor Harold Wanless told the paper.

The scientists believe the plants in coastal Southern Miami-Dade, North Miami and Virginia Key would remain dry for several more decades — but could be damaged by a two-foot rise in the sea level projected to arrive in less than 50 years.

The county Water and Sewage Department drafted its proposal under the pressure of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lawsuit and potentially millions in fines. However, the plan doesn't contain any information about dealing with flooding tides, storm surge and other environmental and climate change risks.

Wanless hopes the data will result in changes before the final plan is sealed.

University of Miami atmospheric science professor Brian Solden said many communities will face difficult and expensive decisions in South Florida as sea levels continue to rise. Even a one foot increase in Miami Beach could worsen high tide flooding there and inundate much of South Miami-Dade.

"If you look at downtown Miami, where all the new places have gone up, all the new condominiums, the billions going in there, those places are at some of the lowest levels," Soden told the paper. "It's a broader impact all of South Florida is going to be facing sooner or later. Right now, a lot of people are choosing not to look at it."

The deputy director of the county water and sewer department defended the plans. Doug Yoder said they are addressing the most pressing concersn and in a cost-effect manner and could build another plant in another 20 or 30 years if needed.

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