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Shutting off ocean outfalls good goal, but implementation could make matters worse

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ISSUE: Legislature moves toward shutting off ocean-polluting wastewater outfall pipes.

South Florida has treated the ocean like a toilet long enough.

That's the welcome signal beaming from a measure racing through the state Legislature that mandates that six outfall pipes dumping 300 million gallons of treated sewage a day into the Atlantic Ocean, about two miles offshore of Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, be shut down by 2025.

Scientists, divers and environmentalists have long sought the pipes' elimination, arguing persuasively that the nutrient-rich matter isn't all getting swept up and diluted by the quick currents of the Gulf Stream, as intended. Instead, enough of it is drifting toward the coast, fostering alga blooms that are smothering some of South Florida's most popular, and fragile, reef systems.

Persuaded by the dire environmental impact, and wanting to do more to promote reuse and recycling of wastewater to bolster the region's dwindling water supplies, legislators crafted a bill that requires utilities to treat the sewage to higher standards by 2018 and build a reuse system by 2025 that recycles the waste for irrigation and other uses.

It's a strong effort, in goal and theory, to bring the region's perilous condition back into ecological balance.

But the measure, as written, is dangerously flawed. And it has nothing to do with the high cost the change in philosophy and approach will mean for many South Florida wastewater customers. Preserving and protecting our natural resources are worth the price.

The problem is its implementation, and the lack of forethought taken in mandating what South Florida utilities will have to do with the sewage once the pipes are shut down. In fact, [Broward County](#) Commissioner Kristin Jacobs makes a convincing argument that the measure could actually lead to more pollution, not less, at least off her county's shores.

Broward is traversed by 1,800 linear miles of canals, all of which feed into the ocean or the Everglades. So the recycled matter that is no longer allowed to be dumped two miles offshore will seep into the waters from land, much closer to the reefs, or into the already-struggling River of Grass. The county also sits directly over the



Biscayne Aquifer, so pouring recycled wastewater into the ground increases the likelihood it will make its way into the drinking supply.

Unlike [Palm Beach County](#), Broward also doesn't have enough undeveloped land mass on which to spread the recycled matter, so much of it will have to be disposed of elsewhere. Jacobs said the state suggested injecting it into the Floridan Aquifer, the future drinking water supply for much of the region — which seems about as crazy as dumping it into the ocean.

There's got to be a better way, and it will likely take some time to figure out, time legislators don't seem to be too interested in as they rush the measure to passage in an election year.

Disposing of our waste and finding alternative water resources is a complicated, and worthy, issue. The outfall bill should be considered a start toward aggressively resolving an evolving crisis. But it's clear that much more needs to be done before it strikes the right balance and delivers a truly responsible, comprehensive solution to a complex problem.

BOTTOM LINE: A worthy goal, but lack of

forethought could actually exacerbate

the problem.

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