

Water agency rule reprieve upsets Charlotte officials

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The drinking water can suddenly stink. It can taste bad and corrode pipes. It can even cause diarrhea "in rare instances."

These problems occur when contaminants such as sulfur and calcium are found in the water in large amounts, an issue the Peace River/Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority has been struggling with the past four months in the face of drought conditions.

But instead of solving the problem in the short term, the authority wants a three-year exemption from state drinking water standards until a new water plant is completed, and some of its customers aren't happy.

"This is unacceptable," Charlotte County Commissioner Tom Moore said Tuesday. "Standards are standards."

The state Department of Environmental Protection has agreed to grant the exemption. But the four counties that are members of the authority — Charlotte, Sarasota, Manatee and DeSoto — have until April 12 to petition for changes. All but Manatee County receive water from the authority.

County officials want to have conditions placed on the exemption permit and are meeting today to discuss the issue.

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It could cost more than \$1 million a month to improve water quality by adding more filters, according to Charlotte Utilities Director Jeff Pearson.

As the water authority's main customer, Charlotte would pay up to 70 percent of those costs, officials said.

"Implementing that right away would be cost-prohibitive," said Commissioner Adam Cummings.

So instead of opposing the exemption, the counties want to allow the authority to exceed the standards only during drought periods, when water must be drawn from deeper sources with higher concentrations of minerals.

Theresa Connor, Sarasota County's water resources manager, supports such conditions on the permit.

The county utility managers understand that sulfate and mineral levels can be high "during extreme droughts," Connor said.

"But we don't like the blanket exemption," she said.

High levels of minerals and sulfates can cause damage to water heaters and the operation of fish tanks, and people need to know that, Connor said.

The best time to warn the public is when the state declares a water emergency and water users are paying attention.

But if the water quality can worsen at any time, as the permit would allow, it makes it more difficult to warn customers, Connor said.

Water authority attorney Doug Manson called the exemption a non-issue. He said the contaminants "are purely aesthetic" and would be below acceptable levels once the authority's water treatment plant in Arcadia is expanded in the next few years.

"To see this as even an issue is a far cry for me," he said. "This is common."

DEP Spokeswoman Pamala Vazquez said the authority would have the first exemptions from the standards since they were set three years ago in the DEP's 12-county Southwest District. "We understand people are concerned about this," she said.