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How deep is the water crisis?

Contrary to popular belief, population growth has not caused an explosion in Florida's water consumption. And draconian measures proposed to deal with the "crisis" overlook the obvious answer: conservation.

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When South Florida Water Management District board members ordered the strictest rationing ever across South Florida late last year, they cited a "biblical drought," even "Armageddon," in the words of Malcolm "Bubba" Wade, the vice president of U.S. Sugar Corp. who serves on the water board.

Throughout Florida's environmental history, state officials have waited for crisis -- or used crisis as cover -- to conserve the state's water and land. The Legislature created Florida's water-management districts in 1972 amid similar language of apocalyptic drought. The Everglades were ablaze, black smoke hung over South Florida, and farmers, local governments and Everglades National Park officials were fighting over who had rights to scarce water.

But lack of fresh water to flood St. Augustine lawns, or even sugar cane, is hardly Armageddon. If you want to see a real water crisis, you need look only two hours from Miami's shores to Haiti, where the children have the highest death and disease rate in our hemisphere -- all because they lack access to fresh water.

Besides, it shouldn't take Armageddon to change Florida's wasteful water ethic. For all our talk of conservation, water restrictions and Florida-friendly landscaping, we've never believed in any of it enough to make it state law. And we haven't changed our basic, fatal misconception about water: that continued growth and development require more and more and more of it.

Florida's water plan says we must have two billion more gallons a day by 2025 to meet future population growth. It simply doesn't have to be that way. California's water plan says that state will use about the same amount of water in 2030 as it does today, even though population is projected to grow by 12 million.

Miami-Dade County's consumptive-use permit, recently renewed by the South Florida Water Management District, assumes demand of 100 million more gallons each day to accommodate growth. (That's a hike from today's 348 million gallons to 448 million by 2026.) The Florida Department of Environmental Protection holds the new permit up as a model because the Miami-Dade Water & Sewer Department reduced some of that demand; it will make up nearly 20 percent of the 100 million gallons with conservation efficiency.

Miami-Dade deserves credit for reducing per-capita consumption from more than 200 gallons per person per day to fewer than 160. It deserves credit for programs like those to retrofit toilets in old houses (29 gallons a day saved with each commode change) and detect leaks (countywide, 10 million gallons a day are lost to leaky pipes).

But the basic assumption is still all wrong. Economic prosperity and increased population growth need not equal ever-increasing water consumption. Nationwide, overall water use stopped increasing in the 1980s, yet population as well as gross domestic product have grown steadily. In Seattle, total water use has remained constant since 1975, even though population has increased 30 percent.

Across Florida, local and regional governments are holding urgent meetings to discuss costly remedies such as desalination plants to ensure that millions more gallons are there for the future. The board rooms are invariably packed with the engineers, lawyers, even out-of-state

desalination-plant builders whose financial gain will be directly proportionate to the size of the new water project approved.

I'm not suggesting we stop water-supply planning. Florida has obviously done a better job than, say, Georgia, where Atlanta is within months of tapping out its sole drinking-water source, Lake Lanier. But we've barely touched the cheapest, easiest and most environmentally sustainable source of "new" water: conservation. A recent report from the U.S. Geological Survey shows that statewide, Florida's per-capita consumption has dropped -- from 174 gallons per person per day in 2000 to 157.7 in 2005. Care to guess the per-capita daily use in "wasteful" Atlanta? It's 120 gallons in the 10-county metro region.

As just one example of Florida's lack of commitment to real conservation efficiency, at the end of our last drought, in 2002, a statewide task force created a report with 51 water-saving measures that would significantly cut our use. Five years later, not one of the recommendations in the Florida Water Conservation Initiative has become state law with tough enforcement.

The 2006 report by the Century Commission for a Sustainable Florida focused on energy, 2007's on water. But the centerpiece recommendation is yet another meeting -- a statewide water summit. Florida doesn't need another water meeting, task force or report. We need what we already know about saving water to make its way into state conservation laws with annual goals to significantly reduce overall use.

Sarasota is a good example of what could be achieved statewide. The county lowered per-capita use from 140 gallons to 90 gallons a day with laws that mandate water-saving landscaping and conservation-rate pricing. Multiply that savings of 50 gallons by 18 million Floridians, and you'd capture nearly a billion "new" gallons of water every day.

Gov. Charlie Crist has taken a bold stand on energy, with tangible goals to reduce the carbon emissions that lead to global warming. That's just the sort of leadership Florida needs when it comes to water -- an about-face, ethical change as dramatic as saying no to coal-fired power plants.

Not because it's Armageddon. Because it's sensible.

GRAPHIC:

South Florida's residents are among the most wasteful in the state, using an average 179 gallons per person per day. In comparison, drought-stricken Atlanta uses 120 gallons per capita daily use. Sarasota County lowered per-capita water use from 140 gallons to 90 gallons a day. Statewide, Floridians use an average 157.5 gallons a day. Here's a look at the numbers by water management district:

Northwest Florida Water Management District: 162.1

Suwannee River Water Management District: 157.9

St. Johns River Water Management District: 150.4

Southwest Florida Water Management District: 137.6

South Florida Water Management District: 179