

Tampa Bay Region/Sinkhole To Be Tapped For Water Supply

Contributed by Marjorie Holt
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<http://www2.tbo.com/content/2009/jan/18/sinkhole-be-tapped-water-supply/>

Sinkhole To Be Tapped For Water Supply

By NEIL JOHNSON | The Tampa Tribune

A small, picturesque sinkhole near Morris Bridge Road will soon begin sending millions of gallons of water a day to the Tampa Bypass Canal that will be available to help quench the region's drought-heightened thirst.

The pumping expected to start late this month or early in February should help Tampa Bay region's water supply, but pumping the Morris Bridge sinkhole in 2000 and 2001 caused wells of some nearby residents to go dry.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District plans to take about 3.8 million gallons a day for a month from the sinkhole and send it to the bypass canal, where it can go into the region's supply.

After the 30-day test, the water management district would have to issue an emergency order if Tampa Bay Water asks to continue tapping the sinkhole.

The pumping is to test whether the sinkhole can provide some of the water needed to ensure fresh water for the Hillsborough River downstream of the dam that forms Tampa's reservoir on the river.

During the dry winter and spring, no water flows past the dam about 10 miles from the river's mouth, creating an area downstream that is too salty. Fresh water from the sinkhole would lower the salinity.

Though the test pumping isn't intended as a boost to the region's water supply, those 3.8 million gallons a day will make their way into residents' faucets.

During the test, the district will monitor aquifer levels around the sinkhole and the wells of people living nearby.

Originally the water management district intended to run the test during the spring but moved it forward because of tight water supplies.

During the drought that lasted from 1999 through 2001, Tampa Bay Water pulled 6.7 million gallons a day from May through August of 2000 from the sinkhole and 9.6 million gallons a day from December of 2000 through July of 2001.

Rainfall that has lagged below average for the past two years has shoved West Central Florida into moderate drought conditions.

Tampa Bay Water, a regional utility that provides wholesale water to public utilities in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco, is straining to meet the region's demand, hobbled by a lack of water in rivers and a damaged reservoir that may be empty by March.

As of last week, the reservoir held 1.8 billion gallons. When full, it holds more than 14 billion gallons. Utility managers were not able to fill the reservoir this summer because of cracks and low water flows in rivers used to supply the reservoir.

On a scale of 1 to 100, flow in the Hillsborough and Alafia rivers is a five.

With little or no water available from the rivers and the reservoir able to provide only a fraction of water compared to past years, the regional utility has only wellfields and a desalination plant to rely on.

But pumping at the wellfields could exceed permit levels later this year if the reservoir runs dry and the desalination plant can only provide about 20 million gallons a day, slightly less than 10 percent of the 229 million gallons residents in the three counties used each day in December.

Any water from the sinkhole would reduce demands on the wellfields.

