

This year's dry season shaping up to be drier than normal

By VALLI FINNEY (Contact)

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NAPLES — Apparently only the wood storks that nested early this year aren't worried about the dry season.

Some fires already have broken out throughout Southwest Florida and water levels in the aquifers are dropping.

And the area is only half-way through the dry season with a drier than normal season forecast, said Randy Smith, a spokesman with South Florida Water Management District.

"Conservation, conservation is the key," Smith said.

The aquifer levels are falling steadily and a smattering of rain last week did nothing more than knock the dust off things, Smith said. No rain is forecast for the near future.

South Florida Water Management District records indicate that the southwest coast, which includes most of the coastal areas of Lee and Collier counties, received .46 inches of rain in November. That equates to 21 percent of the area's average for November. December saw 1.04 inches of rain fall on the region, or 57 percent of the area's average. In January, .21 inches of rain fell on the area, or 9 percent of the average. Through Tuesday of this month, the region has received .37 inches of rain, which is 21 percent of the monthly average.

Typically the Big Cypress area will see about 12 inches of rain during the dry season, said Bob Sobczak with Big Cypress National Preserve. About halfway into the dry season, about two inches of rain has fallen on the area, he said. Sobczak has a blog where he enters information about the area's rainfall and other information about Big Cypress. It can be accessed by going to: <http://sfwj.blogspot.com/>.

The area's rainfall shortage is being experienced district-wide. The 16-county district has seen about 29 percent of the average rainfall between November and February 1.

That has concerned water managers who have issued a public request to get people to begin conserving now.

Fire districts throughout Southwest Florida have been completing prescribed burns to reduce the fuel load in certain areas. If a wildfire breaks out in an area that hasn't burned recently, the results could be catastrophic like the Golden Gate fires last year where three homes were destroyed and people had to be evacuated.

Last year was also very dry going into the summer. The saving grace for the district's aquifers was Tropical Storm Fay, which went through in August 2008 and dumped several inches of rain.

"After Fay the water levels were really high," Sobczak said. Since then, they have steadily dropped.

"We didn't get any rain in October," he said, which is what he calls a shoulder month leading into the dry season.

"Florida also kind of got lucky this year in that we didn't have a storm. But we kind of got unlucky" in that tropical storm systems typically bring heavy rainfall to the area and recharge the lakes and aquifers and help get the area through the dry season.

However, the wood storks apparently took advantage of the conditions.

At Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary the birds began nesting Dec. 12 — a rarity in recent decades, said Jason Lauritsen, assistant director of the sanctuary. Those hatchlings stand a very good chance of surviving.

Historically, the birds would begin nesting in November and December, but since the 1970s, they've typically not done so until January and February.

Some birds are just beginning to nest, which could pose a problem to fledglings. The wood storks and fledglings need water to survive.

"Some didn't start nesting until a week or two ago," Lauritsen said. "Those may run out of resources and we may have some mortality on the nesting."

Lauritsen said preliminary reports indicate more than 700 nests within the sanctuary. He anticipates the final tally to be much higher.

This is the third very dry season in a row, Lauritsen said.

"The difference between this season and the last two seasons is we had Tropical Storm Fay which really replenished" the swamp. "In late September, it was the fourth highest water levels ever recorded. You have a good starting point but the water is dropping incredibly fast."

Comparatively speaking during the 2000-01 dry season, which was one of the worst droughts in recent record, the area received about six inches of rain.

"Back in 2000-01 (Lake Okeechobee) was really dropping down and we had a wet March and that helped a bunch," Sobczak said.

Hopefully that is what will happen next month to keep the water levels from dropping tremendously, he said.

"If we only get two inches of rain during dry season, that's unusually dry," Sobczak said. "If it can be bumped up into 10 inches, it can slow the drop in aquifers."

"Last year, we got a little over a foot of rain, but remember, half of that was from one big rain day," Sobczak said referring to a storm that dropped 5-inches of rain in February 2008. "In a nutshell, it's been a La Nina winter so we're more likely to have a droughtier dry season."

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