



ENVIRONMENT

## FPL faces lawsuit over leaky nuclear cooling canals at Turkey Point

BY JENNY STALETOVICH  
AND DAVID SMILEY

*jstaletovich@miamiherald.com*

March 22, 2016 02:40 PM

Updated March 22, 2016 03:57 PM

The leaky cooling canal system at the Turkey Point nuclear power plant, already under increased scrutiny from Miami-Dade's regulators, now faces a federal lawsuit.

Two environmental groups — the Tropical Audubon Society and Southern Alliance for Clean Energy — said Tuesday that they plan to sue Florida Power & Light over spiraling water pollution concerns that they contend the utility has known about for six years and regulators have failed to adequately address.

“This isn't some thing that just crept up on FPL,” said Laura Reynolds, former executive director with Tropical Audubon now working with the Southern Alliance. “They have made conscious decisions to manage this plant and put resources in some places and not in others. This is a growing problem.”

The formal notice of intent to sue, sent to FPL and state and federal environmental regulators last week, argues that polluted canal water has seeped into Biscayne Bay and the Biscayne aquifer — Miami-Dade's primary source of drinking water — in violation of FPL's environmental permits and the U.S. Clean Water Act.

Thanks for subscribing; you should start to receive your newsletter shortly.

During a press conference in front of Miami City Hall Tuesday morning, leaders of the two environmental groups and state Rep. José Javier Rodríguez, D-Miami, criticized state environmental regulators for sitting as evidence has built that FPL has failed to contain contaminants at its Turkey Point facility.

Rodríguez said he's received some response from county and environmental authorities, but state regulators "appear to do FPL's bidding" even as the utility seeks steep rate hikes from the Legislature.

"What's happening at Turkey Point is a real danger to us, to our water supply," he said. "The fact that there is salt being dumped into the aquifer and the fact that there are contaminants in Biscayne Bay really should have sounded an alarm. But as of yet, we're still waiting for state regulators to step up."

The sprawling canal system at Turkey Point, which acts like a giant radiator to help control temperatures in the plant's two nuclear reactors, is supposed to operate as a "closed system" — isolated from Biscayne Bay to the east and groundwater supplies to the west.

But tritium, a radioactive isotope typically monitored as a "tracer" of nuclear power plant leaks or spills, began showing up years ago in elevated levels in monitoring wells as far as four miles inland.

Then this month, Miami-Dade County released a study showing that water samples in Biscayne Bay in December and January found tritium levels up to 215 times higher than normal in ocean water. The new data confirmed what critics have long suspected: that canals that began running too hot and salty the summer after FPL overhauled two reactors to produce more power could also be polluting the bay.

The tritium itself isn't considered the most serious problem, at least at current levels, but it's an indicator that the canals are spreading potentially damaging pollutants into surrounding waters and the aquifer — including ammonia, phosphorus and excessive concentrations of salt.

The study comes two weeks after a Tallahassee judge ordered the utility and the state to clean up the nuclear plant's cooling canals after concluding that they had caused a massive underground saltwater plume to migrate west, threatening a wellfield that supplies drinking water to the Florida Keys. The judge also found that the state failed to address the pollution by crafting a faulty management plan.

In a column published in the Herald last week, FPL President Eric Silagy downplayed the problems with the canals, saying that the utility was working with regulators to address any issues and ensure the canals were functioning correctly.

"There is absolutely no adverse impact to drinking water, safety or public health," he wrote. "There is not now, nor will there be, any lasting adverse impact on Biscayne Bay."

Stephen Smith, executive director of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy, said Silagy's dismissal of the problem was only more reason for concern — but said he remained hopeful that the utility and regulators will do the right thing and avoid the groups from having to move forward with a federal lawsuit.

"We will make the determination on whether to pull the trigger on the lawsuit based on the appropriate response from state government, the power company and the federal government," he said. "This is a citizens' suit and we're stepping in because of the shredding of the regulatory safety net that should be in place."

**SUGGESTED FOR YOU**