

Environmentalists lash out at dairy runoff, sue agency

■ DEP officials say farmers are doing everything required to keep manure from fouling waterways.

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Large dairies are polluting Florida's waterways while state environmental regulators do nothing to stop them, according to a lawsuit filed Monday by a coalition of environmental groups.

Protection is allowing 35 large dairies — including operations in Pasco, Manatee and Sarasota counties — to discharge hundreds of thousands of pounds of animal waste into nearby waterways without even requiring them to obtain permits, according to the lawsuit filed against DEP in Leon County court.

"They're not doing their job," said activist Linda Young, who along with ManaSota-88, Save Our Suwannee, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the Conservation Alliance of St. Lucie County filed the lawsuit. "Not

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The state Department of Environmental

Dairies from 1B

only are they damaging the environment, but it's potentially a threat to public health."

However, spokesmen for the DEP and the dairy farmers say they already are doing everything required by law to prevent cow manure from fouling rivers, lakes and ponds, as well as the underground aquifer that supplies much of the state's drinking water.

"I wish every dollar that we are now going to be forced to spend fighting with these so-called environmentalists could instead be spent cleaning the water," DEP Secretary David Struhs said in a state-

ment.

Since 1999, the state has dispatched inspectors to check the wastewater systems at dairies with more than 700 cows, and it is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to meet federal clean water standards for pollution discharges from those dairies, according to DEP spokeswoman Lucia Ross.

"It's not like we're sitting back not doing anything," she said.

At Gore Dairies in Zephyrhills, named in the lawsuit as posing a pollution threat to the Hillsborough and Withlacoochee rivers, owner Fred Gore could not be reached for comment. But employee Jim Waits said DEP inspectors have "come out and checked us out. As far as we know, we're doing everything we're supposed

to." Phil Leary of the Florida Farm Bureau said dairy farms, which he said are mostly family-run operations, have made major advances in recent years in disposing of their waste by using it as fertilizer for the grasses that are then fed to the cattle.

Leary said the farms are already so tightly regulated that "permitting a new dairy is almost like siting a power plant." However, he added, "you're not going to have 100 percent ability to control all the environmental impacts."

Young and attorney Melanie Flynn of the Natural Resources Defense Council said the lawsuit is based on DEP letters and inspection reports outlining how the large dairies are improperly disposing of thousands of gallons of waste their cows

produce every day. DEP officials wrote that the dairies are likely fouling nearby waterways and should apply for permits but told them to wait until the agency designed a new permit process, Young and Flynn said.

For instance, a 1999 DEP inspection report on Parrish Dairy in Myakka City showed that its wastewater system was discharging into nearby Gamble Creek, which flows into the Manatee River and out into Tampa Bay. The discharge was "nearly continuous throughout much of the year," the report stated.

Another 1999 report showed that whenever a moderate rain fell on the De Soto County dairy owned by NFC Management Inc., there was likely to be a discharge of waste to Prairie Creek, a

tributary of Shell Creek Reservoir, which provides drinking water for Punta Gorda.

In both cases, the inspectors recommended that the dairies be required to get permits, but Young said they had not done so. Operators of those dairies could not be reached for comment Monday.

Other dairies specifically cited in the lawsuit were in or near Hollywood, Fort Lauderdale, Okeechobee, Chiefland, Avon Park, Wauchula, Palm City, Moore Haven, Green Cove Springs, Jacksonville, Bell, Wacissa, Greenville, Mayo, Branford, Paisley, Morrison, Umatilla, Summerfield and Live Oak.

Several of them are in the vicinity of the Suwannee and Santa Fe rivers, where once pristine springs are now polluted with nitrates from farm runoff.