

Wheeler delivers adaptation money to Miami. Is it enough?

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EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler is visiting the South District Wastewater Treatment Plant today in Miami-Dade County. Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department

A climate-minded utility is getting some help from the Trump administration.

EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler is scheduled this morning to close a nearly \$100 million low-interest loan to the Miami-Dade Water and Sewer Department. The loan, part of the Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act program, aims to help the utility end wastewater discharges into the ocean, boost its peak capacity and make the system more resilient.

A Florida mandate to end daily ocean discharges by 2025 is driving the improvements. But so is the broader realignment toward climate resiliency that's touching all kinds of infrastructure in southeast Florida, where low elevation, heavy coastal development and porous geology make sea-level rise an especially potent threat.

Miami-Dade's utility has been especially forward-thinking, according to the Resilient Utility Coalition, which named the Water and Sewer Department its 2018 Resilient Utility of the Year. The department distinguished itself with a multibillion-dollar capital improvement plan that accounts for sea-level rise and other climate impacts, the coalition said.

All three of Miami-Dade's wastewater treatment plants sit on the coast. EPA's loan will help pay for new injection wells where the utility can discharge wastewater. It will help the utility cope with larger volumes of water, as well as harden the facilities against higher floodwaters.

"Our wastewater system as a result will be more resilient to extreme weather events, because all new construction is being designed to withstand storm surges that might cause more flooding as sea levels rise," said Jennifer Messemer, spokeswoman for the water and sewage department.

The Trump administration's occasional embrace of climate adaptation measures does help coastal communities. But it comes as EPA and other federal agencies are in the midst of rolling or scaling back Obama-era climate policies.

Some experts warn that, without emissions reductions, coastal communities will continue facing the same problems: a climate that's worsening more quickly than they can adapt.

Long term, doing adaptation without emissions reduction doesn't help a city's future, said Erika Spanger-Siegfried, a senior analyst at the Union of Concerned Scientists' climate and energy program.

Spanger-Siegfried led a **project** mapping how coastal communities across the country could see chronic inundation, or flooding about every other week. Miami could see 5% of its land chronically inundated by 2080, and almost 20% by 2100.

"Investment in infrastructure that's going to last 50 years and shore up a city to allow it to continue treating its waste makes really good sense," Spanger-Siegfried said.

"But if, on the other hand, you're doing nothing to slow the acceleration of climate change, you're really not ... serving that city the way you're professing to."