

# Controversial Black Creek water project progressing

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South Prong Black Creek. Photo St Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman

This plan to transfer water from Black Creek to other locations has already been discussed on our posts. See "[Robbing Peter to Pay Paul](#)," Our comments then are still pertinent:

*Omitted by the scientists from the St Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) is the obvious fact that if the district would not issue excessive pumping permits, this project would not be necessary.*

*When nature's balance is not upset by the interference of*

people, normally things take care of themselves. The Keystone lake system has been under stress for years due to excessive pumping by mines, agriculture and especially JEA. Because [SJRWMD](#) is giving away too much water, lake levels in the Keystone system have dropped, causing lake property values to do the same, raising the ire of lake dwellers. Water transference is seldom a good idea, and often brings problems along with the water. One of these is cost.

The Florida taxpayer should not foot the bill for this experimental process which may or may not be successful. The water users who have lowered the water level in these lakes should have the cost added to their free water permits. Paying for water is inevitable in Florida and the sooner we start the better.

Read this article in the [Gainesville Sun](#).

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

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By [Teresa Stepzinski](#)

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A controversial state project to pump water from Black Creek to recharge the region's aquifer at Keystone Heights took a major step forward with the recent acquisition of property needed for

the roughly 17-mile pipeline through southwest Clay County.

The St. Johns River Water Management District governing board unanimously voted May 8 to buy a 3-acre tract at Seamark Ranch near Florida 16 for \$48,000. The site is where water will be withdrawn from the Black Creek South Prong.

The state agency previously secured property easements from the Clay County Commission and Camp Blanding Joint Training Center for the pipeline. The Seamark Ranch property was the final tract needed for the Black Creek project, said Robert Zammataro, bureau chief for district projects and construction.

The Camp Blanding easement encompasses 240 acres at the discharge location, while the three-acre county easement is adjacent to the intake area at the Seamark Ranch tract.

Zammataro said environmental impact studies to be used as part of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection permit process are nearing completion. The district hopes to submit the studies by July, he said.

The project calls for using Black Creek – which floods frequently – as an alternative water supply to meet the region's future water needs by helping replenish the Floridan aquifer, the state's main water source. It is the first attempt in Northeast Florida to use water from a creek or river to recharge the aquifer.

A major tributary of the St. Johns River, the 13-mile long creek – split into the North Prong and South Prong that merge in Middleburg – typically meanders through Clay County at a tranquil pace. Hurricane Irma's fury last year sent the creek out of its banks to destroy or damage about 1,000 homes.

The district plans to take up to 10 million gallons per day from

the Black Creek South Prong when the water is high enough – which agency officials say is 75 percent of the time but some residents dispute that – then pump it through a pipeline to a recharge area near Keystone Heights where the water will be discharged into the Upper Floridan aquifer and into Alligator Creek connecting a chain of lakes.

“The goal is to take water when there is excess water is available,” Zammataro said. “The idea is to leave a base flow which then will leave the Black Creek ecosystem intact and not have any adverse effects on the ecosystem.”

Zammataro said the district estimates the water level of the aquifer will increase on average about 1- to 2 feet in the area of the Keystone Heights lakes when the project is done.

“You are looking at about seven million gallons a day of recharge,” he said.

St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman along with some Black Creek residents and area environmental activists have multiple concerns the project will alter, if not damage or destroy, the creek – long considered one of Florida’s cleanest creeks.

“It seems as if they are putting the cart before the horse by going out and buying property before they have the environmental assessments and the water quality issues well thought out,” Rinaman said.

Rinaman said she’s very concerned about “unintended consequences” especially to the South Prong. The water quality implications are particularly worrisome, she said.

Named for its water color, which results from tannin produced by decaying vegetation and leaves, Black Creek is reddish in shallow areas, while the deeper water appears black. The creek’s

water quality is different including containing more phosphorus than the water of the Keystone Heights lakes, she said.

“So when you’re re-plumbing an area like this you have to be very cautious to make sure all of those implications are being considered throughout the process,” Rinaman said. When she visited the planned withdrawal site last week she said there wasn’t much water flow.

The pumping could degrade water quality downstream in the creek as well as the Keystone lakes. There also is forested flood plain that needs water and needs it on a routine basis. The creek has high flows and flooding at times, but that doesn’t happen on a routine basis. That means there can be ecological damage done to the areas that need that routine freshwater flow, Rinaman said.

“There needs to be a holistic look at these ecosystems and what those environmental impacts will be, but they they seem to be steaming ahead on this project before they have those problems worked out,” Rinaman said.

Rinaman said taking water from Black Creek also has implications for the St. Johns River.

“When you pull fresh water out then you have downstream impacts to the wetlands, which are the kidneys of the river. So, it reduces the river’s ability to cleanse itself,” she said.

Zammataro said they are working through those and other issues raised by residents.

He said the district hasn’t finalized the benchmarks to determine the minimum base flow rate of the creek before water would be withdrawn. District engineers are re-evaluating the initial rate cited in its preliminary assessment, and doing more

water quality samplings, Zammataro said.

The estimated \$41 million project should raise chronically low water levels in lakes Brooklyn and Geneva in Keystone Heights, which are fed by Alligator Creek, according to the district.

The water would be withdrawn from the creek at the Seamark Ranch tract and pumped through a pipeline along Florida 16 and Florida 21 toward Keystone Heights then discharged on Camp Blanding property. The water then will be dispersed onto a spreader field, make its way to Alligator Creek to be stored in lakes Brooklyn and Geneva in Keystone Heights to replenish the aquifer, according to the plan.

The district is considering building a kayak launch on the creek south of Florida 16 on the east of the creek, Teresa Monson, a district spokeswoman said.

The district's preliminary assessment of the project says the amount of water to be taken "may be safely withdrawn from Black Creek with negligible environmental effects."

That's not reassuring to people living on Black Creek or those who kayak, boat or fish on it. The creek's beauty and diverse ecosystem also is fragile and priceless, they say.

Paul Still, a research scientist living in adjacent Bradford County, is among the project critics.

"It should be clear that the wetlands associated with Black Creek at Penney Farms require frequent high creek levels to keep them functioning and that withdrawing water at the proposed rate for the Black Creek Project would harm those wetlands," said Still, a retired University of Florida biologist with a doctorate in plant pathology.

He noted the higher phosphorus content of the creek water was

among the factors leading the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to reject a proposal to pump Black Creek water to the Keystone lakes several years ago.

“The phosphorus content of Black Creek water is high enough it would probably cause problems with algae blooms in Lake Brooklyn,” Still said.

Zammataro said the district is exploring different options such as using ponds or wetlands to essentially treat the creek water so it is compatible with the phosphorus levels of the lakes.

Still said another concern is the project’s cost. A less expensive alternative, he said, would take water currently discharged by the neighboring Chemours mining operation into Alligator Creek then running through Starke where it could be pumped to a point where it would flow naturally to the Keystone lakes.

He said that would cost about \$500,000 and reduce flooding in Starke. The Bradford Soil and Water Conservation District in Starke, where Still is administrator, has proposed that alternative.

Cheryl McDavitt, who’s lived on the Black Creek South Prong since 1990, is among residents worried about the project’s impact.

“I have concerns about the delicate environmental balance in the creek. There is marine life unique to the creek,” said McDavitt, citing the Black Creek crayfish.

The crayfish is protected by state law as a threatened species. Found in Clay, Duval, Putnam and St. Johns counties, the species lives in tannin-filled streams such as Black Creek.

To survive, the crayfish needs higher quality water, which means

it's vulnerable to pollution, including silt, damming and changes in water temperature, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The district's preliminary assessment says the project's impact will be minimal on the crayfish because the species appears to primarily live above the area where the water will be withdrawn. Zammataro said environmental impact studies should have more information about the issue.

Rinaman and Still also said the project could limit ecotourism and recreation opportunities on Black Creek.

Some kayakers and boaters worry the project will cause water levels to drop so much the creek won't be deep enough to use in places, especially close to the withdrawal site. Photos posted by a kayaker May 9 to the Save Black Creek public Facebook page indicated the creek was only about a foot deep at the site.

"We kayaked in about a foot of water for about 3 hours before the water was any deeper. ... I can't imagine this would not deplete the water closest to [Florida] 16 quickly. I'm even willing to bet the flow would stop at some point and the creek would become separated," the kayaker wrote.

Zammataro acknowledged the most noticeable impact on the water level will be at the withdrawal site. At the maximum rate, the water level only will drop about three inches at the withdrawal site. Downstream it will be less noticeable, he said.

"The homeowners that are actually adjacent to the creek will not see or be able to measure any noticeable difference," Zammataro said.

Some residents also worry the project will open the flood gates to more water withdrawals from the aquifer. With more water

going in, more will be available to be taken out for development to the detriment of the creek as well as the lakes, they worry.

Scott Laidlaw, district Bureau of Water Supply Planning chief, said the authorization for new permits to withdraw water in the future will be evaluated during the permit application process. Any proposed groundwater withdrawals, he said, would be evaluated to determine the regional impact.

If all goes well, construction could begin in July 2019 and is projected to take four years, Zammataro said.

The district intends to hold public meetings about the project as it progresses, but no dates have been set.

*Teresa Stepzinski writes for the Florida Times-Union in Jacksonville.*