

Dr. Robert Knight Discusses Sleepy Creek Controversy

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Dr. Robert Knight of the Florida Springs Institute and the Silver Springs Alliance has published an opinion piece in today's *Gainesville Sun*. You may see the original article in today's *Sun* [here](#), or continue reading for a reproduction. Our thanks go to Nathan Crabbe and the *Gainesville Sun* for special permission to re-publish the

article here in its entirety.

Robert Knight: Sleepy Creek's profits come at staggering cost to public

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Special to The Sun

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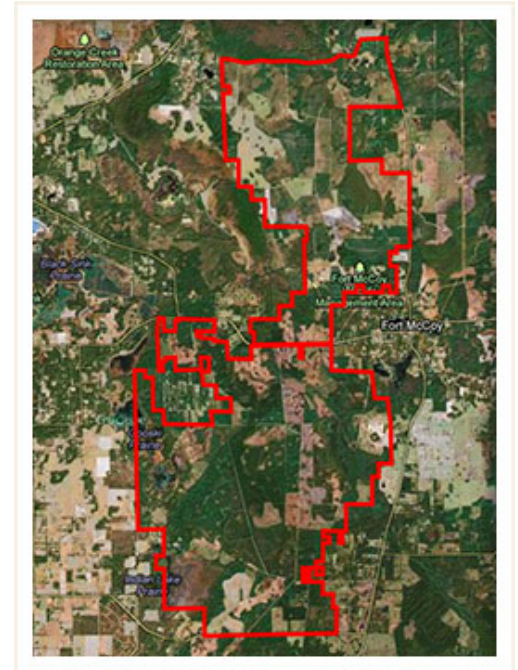
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Your state government is hard at work – spending hundreds of thousands of your tax dollars to fight environmental advocates trying to protect Silver Springs, the Silver River and the Ocklawaha River from further degradation.

During five days last week, the petitioners – Karen Ahlers, Jeri Baldwin, the Sierra Club, the St. Johns Riverkeeper and the Florida Defenders of the Environment – joined forces in a David and Goliath struggle against Canadian billionaire Frank Stronach's Sleepy Creek Lands (aka Adena Springs Ranch) cattle

operation near Fort McCoy.

Against all logic, the St. Johns River Water Management District was on the wrong side of this legal contest.



Sleepy Creek's holdings

At stake was the transfer of an existing 1.46 million gallons per day (MGD) groundwater permit from a former sod farm to the first phase of Stronach's grass-fed beef operation. After 2 1/2 years of negotiations that reduced the requested groundwater use from an average of 13.2 to about 5.3 MGD for about 17,000 cows on nearly 30,000 acres, the applicant and district decided to divide the ranch project into multiple phases. In May, the district recommended issuance of water quality and groundwater pumping permits for the first phase.

Over 4,000 acres of timberland have already been cleared to accommodate more than 6,000 cattle. Instead of relying on Florida's abundant rainfall to water their grass, Sleepy Creek plans to use over 200 gallons of aquifer (i.e., spring) water per cow per day to increase its profit margin. But this extra

profit comes at a staggering cost to the public.

The petitioners' experts made the following demonstrations of fact. First, the previous permittee, Johnson Sod Farm, was actually using about 0.2 MGD and not the permitted 1.46 MGD, and therefore the transferred permit actually allows an average 1.26 MGD increase in groundwater use, inflicting further harm at Silver Springs and the Ocklawaha River.

The 6,400 cattle planned for Phase 1 will produce an estimated 158 million pounds of manure and 11 million gallons of urine per year. The irrigated grass will require about 700,000 pounds of nitrogen in fertilizer, in addition to the cow wastes.

These cumulative nitrogen loads are expected to contribute additional pollution of the region's surface and groundwater.

While the district's consultant opined that 1.46 MGD is a "small" groundwater extraction, in fact it would authorize the cattle operation to divert a total of 10.7 billion gallons of water that would otherwise nourish the area's springs over the 20-year permit period.

Another way to look at 1.46 MGD is to realize that at current average Florida per-capita water use rates, this permitted quantity could provide a perpetual water supply for about 10,700 people.

While the district has recently determined that the aquifer feeding Silver Springs is over-allocated by more than 30 MGD, and the whole district is facing a serious shortage of water for public supply, district management is so eager to appease this applicant that they expended hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars to defend the issuance of this permit. This money was spent on at least four district lawyers, a dozen or more district staff professionals and at least four outside

consultants billing up to \$250 per hour for hundreds of hours each.

Earlier this year the district committed to spending \$20 million on springs projects that they claim will eliminate more than 700,000 pounds of nitrogen pollution per year and reduce existing groundwater withdrawals by up to 1.5 MGD. Those problems are just the tip of the iceberg of springs impairments caused by previously permitted projects. The obvious irony is that a simple denial of the Sleepy Creek permit would have accomplished the same goals and saved taxpayers \$20 million.

A public hearing was held as part of the permit challenge. With only two days of notification, about 100 people showed up at district headquarters in Palatka to plead with the judge for permit denial. The public's testimonies were taken under oath and entered into the official record. Their words were both inspiring and heart-breaking.

Sleepy Creek's neighbors are already suffering intolerable consequences, including the sight of wild animals driven from their forest homes by land-clearing, swarms of biting flies, failure of adjacent private wells, and discharges of manure-filled surface runoff into wetlands. Dozens of concerned citizens described the former beauty of Silver Springs and their dismay over its current sad condition due to declining flow and increasing nutrient pollution.

The petitioners, those individuals and environmental groups who are trying to protect Florida's springs and rivers, had to raise more than \$150,000 in donations to fight this Phase 1 project. Still, there is no guarantee of success, and it will be months until the state's hearing officer makes a final ruling. In the meantime, the sheer injustice of the district issuing a permit to a private corporation in the face of falling aquifer levels,

impaired springs and rivers, and over the objections of thousands of local citizens is unfathomable.

Florida's water law is clear. Every permitted groundwater extraction needs to be in the "public interest." The public has bravely spoken that the proposed Sleepy Creek water use is not in their interest. The district should listen more closely to the people whose environmental treasures they are entrusted to protect.

It is not too late for the district's governing board to right this mistake and to boldly deny every new and existing permit that further harms the public trust.

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