

The Fight to Protect the Environment Continues

April 29, 2009

R. "Robin" Lewis III , wetlands scientist and President of the Putnam County Environmental Council, promises to continue the fight to protect the environment, especially from excessive water withdrawals. Read on the for article which appeared in the *Ocala Star Banner*. The original article appeared [HERE](#) in the Star Banner on Sunday, April 26, 2009



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OTHER VOICES

***Trust us, this is a new beginning,
not beginning of the end***

By R. "Robin" Lewis III

Special to the Star-Banner

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Eighteen months ago I made a presentation at the first "Water Wars" summit. At that time, I spoke from my heart with these comments: "I come before you today to speak for our rivers, our trees and our children who will inherit these from us, to speak for the bear, butterfly and blue crab, the otter and osprey,

for they have few champions.”

In the intervening months more champions have come forth, including Arlen Jumper, Marion County’s representative on the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) Governing Board, who voted against taking more water from the St. Johns River on the 13th of this month.

Karen Ahlers, president of Putnam County Environmental Council, and I have sent numerous letters and e-mails, had countless meetings with the SJRWMD, the U.S. Forest Service, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the Office of Greenways and Trails. Our meetings have invariably ended with calm reassurances from the agencies.

“Trust us,” they all say. “We are working on your behalf and we would not let environmental harm occur.” They never admit to the existing environmental harm to both the Ocklawaha and the St. Johns rivers.

When we present our legal opinions, they say, “Trust us, our legal interpretations are correct, and yours are wrong.” We will let the Governor and Cabinet decide this one, as we have filed a legal petition challenging their proposal to withdraw water without regard for seasonal dry conditions and with inadequate conservation measures in place.

When we present our scientific evidence and arguments, they say, “Trust us, our science is correct and yours is wrong.” Yet they refuse to discuss the Ocklawaha’s 50 percent decrease in flow. They maintain it is just variations in rainfall. Our scientists strongly disagree.

But I have to tell you that funding has been limited and we struggle every day to continue our efforts on your behalf. While we have raised \$100,000 over the last three years, we

really need \$100,000 per year to support the science team which I lead for free, the legal team which works for much reduced rates. I again ask for your recommitted help in finding these funds. Without them, the Ocklawaha River is doomed.

Our lost vote over unsustainable withdrawals of freshwater from the St. Johns River, and the prospect of the same fate for the Ocklawaha River, however, are not necessarily the “beginning of the end?” as Brad Rogers noted in his April 19th Star-Banner column. It was but one lost battle in a war we must win. I would hope with your support that vote represents a “new beginning” of citizen awareness and support for PCEC and our partners to push back even harder.

So I have a message to deliver to the SJRWMD and the other public land management organizations we have politely met with and offered scientific and legal expertise to for the last 18 months:

Trust us, we are not fools, and we are not stupid. We know your intent is to take our water for more irrational growth regardless of the science and regardless of laws you choose to ignore. We know you intend to take 104 million gallons per day from the Ocklawaha River, no matter what the science says, and withdraw it 24/7/365, no matter what the law says. We also know that your 4th Addendum to the District Water Supply Plan now raises the proposed withdrawals from the St. Johns River from 155 mgd to 220 mgd. Thus, the highly touted maximum of 262 mgd to be taken from both systems has somehow risen to 324 mgd in just a few months. We expect it to further increase over time.

Trust us, we have lost all faith in your ability to listen to the pleadings of your employers, the citizens of Florida, since 400 vocal citizens and 19,000 e-mails cannot sway your decisions.

Therefore, trust us, we will redouble our efforts to force change – political, administrative and legal – as needed. We are the loyal opposition, and our opposition is getting stronger.

And finally, trust us not to bow to bad laws, bad science and bad decision-making, because we are still committed to being the champions of the rivers, the trees, the bear, the butterfly and the blue crab, the otter and the osprey, for they and our children and our children's children deserve a future with plentiful flows of clean water and a restored environment, and not the green sluggish rivers lined with dead trees that you would propose to give us.

We have slowly made progress in further protecting the Ocklawaha River, and finally can see a light at the end of the tunnel leading to full restoration. We need the public's help now more than ever. Our mission is to provide the best science and legal arguments against further destruction of our rivers. The expertise needed to develop the best science and prepare the most