

John S. Quarterman: Watered-down bill won't fix water quality issues

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John Quarterman speaks to the OSFR Board at the monthly meeting Aug. 30, 2019. Photo by Jim Tatum

Succinct and accurate analysis by Suwannee RiverKeeper John Quarterman of this useless bill. While allowing our governor and water protectors to beat their chests and proclaim self greatness, the bill will not help our water problems, only postpone any possible solutions for years to come.

Citizens of Florida, your leaders have hoodwinked you.

Shame on our water leaders. Shame, Shame.

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

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

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*– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

John S. Quarterman: Watered-down bill won't fix water quality issues

By John S. Quarterman/Special to The Sun

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Gov. Ron DeSantis just signed into law SB 712, the so-called “Clean Waterways Act,” which falls far short of that mark.

This bill has been praised by its supporters as one of the most environmentally progressive pieces of legislation in over a decade. Yet after the cuts and rollbacks to our environmental regulations by the last state administration, that isn't saying much. The bill pays lip service to most of Florida's major sources of pollution, but lacks the specificity and enforceability to actually solve any of the problems.

The bill directs the establishment of a “real-time water quality monitoring program” but allocates no funds for it. It says nothing about detecting contamination in rivers (whether from out-of-state or local sources) and following its travel downstream, and nothing about alerting the public in a timely

manner.

The bill allows agricultural violators of Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs) to self-monitor their own water quality. Assessments are required only every five years, and then only for undefined "reasonable progress" with no realistic methods to reach 20-year goals.

Proponents of the bill claim that it implements recommendations of the Blue Green Algae Task Force, but even those common sense, albeit vague, recommendations will not be achieved through the implementation of SB 712. For example, the Task Force recommended that projected changes in demographics, land use and hydrology should be incorporated into the BMAP process.

With 1,000 people moving to Florida every day, over the 20-year life of a BMAP millions of people and their new homes will have added strain to our already-stressed natural resources. A BMAP that does not anticipate these changes and incorporate a plan to deal with them is destined to fail. Unfortunately, SB 712 ignores the common-sense recommendations and doubles down on the ineffective BMAP system that has resulted in the water quality crisis that we are in today.

Furthermore, the bill fails to meaningfully address one of the largest sources of nutrient pollution in our state: agriculture. The Task Force recommended that the effectiveness of best management practices should be supported by adequate data to justify the presumption of compliance with water quality standards, but SB 712 only increased monitoring for current best management practices that have proven to be ineffective at curbing water quality pollution.

With regard to public health, the Task Force recommended that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection establish defensible health advisories and water quality criteria for

cyanotoxins and that the Department of Health should work with FDEP to implement a communication plan to inform the public about the potential health risks associated with exposure to toxic algae. Despite the harmful algae blooms that have already begun to plague our waterways this summer and the inconsistent and ineffective signage to warn users of their danger, this was not addressed by SB 712 either.

Supporters of the bill laud the initiation of rulemaking to address things like septic systems, biosolids and stormwater systems, but when it comes to environmental rules, the devil is in the details. The effectiveness of these provisions will rely entirely on the specifics of the rules as they are drafted and will only matter if they are actually adopted.

Top this off with flashy grant programs (subject to appropriations) that, based on the Legislature's track record of underfunding conservation programs, may never come (see Florida Forever), especially with COVID-19 budget deficits. With reports and studies that will kick the can down the road for another 10 years, you have a bill that hardly deserves the title "Clean Waterways Act."

If that weren't bad enough, a late-stage amendment added a provision that preempts local governments from passing Rights of Nature regulations, a growing international movement that recognizes species and ecosystems as entities with rights of their own that could be protected in a court of law...

We can no longer afford the luxury of incremental steps. We need strong, enforceable, science-based regulations that protect our waters now. SB 712 does not do that.

John S. Quarterman is Suwannee Riverkeeper. This place was submitted on behalf of Waterkeepers Florida, which composed of all 13 Waterkeeper organizations working in Florida to protect

and restore our water resources across over 45,000 square miles of watershed, which is home to over 15 million Floridians. For more information, visit www.waterkeepersflorida.org.