

Serious About Springs

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The Gainesville Sun has an excellent editorial today describing once again the state's failure to protect and conserve our water resources. Ironically, new monies allocated for helping the springs too often go to subsidize the very industries that are causing the problem. We save a cup of water and then needlessly waste 500 gallons.

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Editorial: Serious about springs

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A spate of recent news stories shows that the state still isn't serious about protecting our springs and other water resources, despite appearances to the contrary.

Last week, state lawmakers allocated \$25 million in funding for springs restoration. The money is to be matched by \$44 million from local governments and water management districts.

Springs advocates shouldn't necessarily celebrate. As Florida Springs Institute Director Robert Knight pointed out in a [column](#) last month for The Sun, the projects were chosen behind closed doors without citizen involvement.

Much of the money is being spent on subsidies to farms, housing developments and other private interests – the same kind of entities responsible for draining and polluting our groundwater. The projects include \$3.6 million to reduce groundwater withdrawals at a Hamilton County phosphate mine and \$12 million to be used in part to allow three Citrus County golf courses to use reclaimed water.

The state continues to subsidize private entities without requiring them to change the behaviors that degraded our springs. While these projects provide benefits, groups getting taxpayer money should also be required to take steps such as dramatically reducing nutrient pollution.

Another news item that appeared good on its face was an administrative law judge's ruling last week on the state's proposed environmental protections for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee rivers. The judge ruled that the protections, known as minimum flows and levels or MFLs, are invalid.

Despite the state's acknowledgment that the water bodies and springs have already suffered significant environmental harm, the MFLs were watered down to allow utilities and other big users to get massive, 20-year water withdrawal permits. The permits will supposedly be re-evaluated once a water study is done within five years.

The judge ruled on narrow, technical grounds in finding that required supporting information for the regulations was too vague. While the advocates who filed the challenge celebrated the decision, regulators have suggested they will make only limited changes to the rules.

One utility that helped weaken the rules, Gainesville Regional Utilities, also received news last week that it was granted a 20-year renewal of a permit allowing it to pump up to 30 million gallons per day from the aquifer.

GRU is better than most utilities but still must do more to encourage water conservation. Unfortunately, a serious discussion of strategies to do so has been absent from the current debate over new water rates.

The recent stories at least show that protecting our springs is now a major part of the state's public-policy debate. But until the state gets serious about reversing the springs' decline, the new projects and regulations will only maintain the status quo of degraded water resources.