

State fails to protect, then pays to restore springs

October 30, 2020



Advocates demonstrate against water bottlers at Ginnie Springs.
Photo by Jim Tatum.

OPINION The Gainesville Sun

State fails to protect, then pays to restore springs

Jim Tatum

Guest columnist

October 30, 2020

Good news from the Suwannee River Water Management District: The state of Florida will spend \$1.3 million on springs restoration projects in Columbia County.

The money will go for 163 acres, which includes Sawdust Springs

and nearly a mile of Santa Fe River shoreline. And across the river in Gilchrist County, \$1 million has gone for an ongoing acquisition of 2,742 acres, all in the springshed of the Devil's Ear Spring complex.

As it so happens, of the 440 springs in the district's area, these were favored for help. Starting at Poe and moving downriver, we find Lily, Pickard, Rum Island, Naked, Gilchrist Blue, Devil's Eye, July, Devil's Ear, Ginnie, Dogwood, Sawdust, Twin and Deer springs, plus many smaller ones, in a seven-mile stretch beginning about nine miles west of High Springs.

Here we have a literal outpouring of our aquifer the likes of which are not found elsewhere in our nation. Fortunately, some of our lawmakers in the past have realized the wealth and value of these springs and have forged strong state laws to protect them. Unfortunately, many of our protective agencies such as the Department of Environmental Protection and water districts make it a practice to break these laws.

Florida Administrative Code Chapter 62-302.700 protects Outstanding Florida Waters (which this area is designated) and allows "no degradation." Under the Clean Water Act, federal law states that "... flow itself is protected in state-protected waters such as springs ..." from alterations such as "groundwater withdrawals."

You can't get much clearer than that. What part of "no degradation" and "groundwater withdrawals" do the state and district not understand?

Seven Springs Water Company has been pumping water from Ginnie for over 20 years and now is suing the district to renew its permit to continue to draw up to 1.152 million gallons per day for resale to Nestle Waters North America or whomever may own the nearby plant.

In its application, the company has admitted its intent to

continue to draw down the spring, aquifer and wetlands. This by the laws of physics will further degrade an already polluted and over-pumped waterway, designated by DEP as "impaired" and "in recovery," with a flow 30% less than it should be.

The district's arrogance in disregarding these laws is further emphasized by the fact that it has issued thousands of water withdrawal permits in the Santa Fe River basin since the river's protections were put in place.

Having less actual legal teeth but similar in intent are the supposed protective layers of the Priority Focus Area, which implies protection by identifying springs and areas "that are most important from the perspectives of both water quality restoration and protection." Authority for the Priority Focus Areas comes from the Florida Springs and Aquifer Protection Act, adopted by the Legislature in 2016.

Not only has the district/state chosen to invest in Sawdust Springs and adjoining land immediately across the river from Ginnie Springs Outdoors campground, but they also make available an opportunity for a cost share program that "provides funding assistance for projects that improve the quality and quantity of the state's water resources that protect and improve springs."

We could go on with more meaningless protective designations such as Water Resource Caution Area, in which these springs are found, but the point we are finally getting to is: Why did the water management district choose this specific area of springs to dump money on?

This seven-mile stretch is our area's economic engine that drives our community. And this community is now threatened by a local family-run business that wants to pump more water out of our springs to sell to Nestle Waters North America, which plans to produce, fill with water and ship up to 6,000 plastic

bottles per minute.

The district spends millions to maintain/restore the spring complex of Ginnie and at the same time is the agency issuing a pumping permit to extract over a million gallons of water per day from a river they are bound by law to restore.

Making it worse are the facts that this water is not needed by the public, it will be shipped away from our aquifer and despite Nestle's false claims, over 90% of the bottles will end up in landfills, streets, road ditches and our rivers.

But that's OK – there's plenty of taxpayer money around to clean up after the corporations take their profits.

Jim Tatum is historian for Our Santa Fe River and lives in Tampa.