

'The heart of the Great Florida Riverway'

December 14, 2020



Weeds on the Ocklawaha. Photo by Karen Chadwick.

Very few, if any reasons remain to retain the dam on this river. Independent, factual, studies have been made which show that a stronger economy for the local area would result with the

river restored, in spite of what some fishermen allege.

The stagnant weed mess that is the old river channel is an icon for Florida's incompetence and inability to maintain its waters and is a shame for all. The DEP, Fish and Wildlife Commission and Florida's lawmakers should all hang their heads for their inexcusable inaction.

Read the original article here in [the Florida Times Union](#).

Very few, if any reasons remain to retain the dam on this river. Independent, factual, studies have been made which show that a stronger economy for the local area would result with the river restored, in spite of what some fishermen allege.

The stagnant weed mess that is the old river channel is an icon for Florida's incompetence and inability to maintain its waters and is a shame for all. The DEP, Fish and Wildlife Commission and Florida's lawmakers should all hang their heads for their inexcusable inaction.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

jim.tatum@oursantaferiver.org

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

'The heart of the Great Florida Riverway'

Green groups start drive to remove dam at Rodman Reservoir, opening Ocklawaha River

Steve Patterson

Jacksonville Florida Times-Union USA TODAY NETWORK December 10, 2020

Dozens of environmental groups have launched an online campaign to build support for undamming the Ocklawaha River, a waterway most Floridians have never seen.

The outreach this month by the Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition aims to raise new followers by rebranding the Ocklawaha as “the heart of the Great Florida Riverway,” a marketer’s name for a 217-mile system of waterways – including the St. Johns River’s lower basin – that shape North Florida the way the Everglades define South Florida.

Fifty-two years after the Ocklawaha was dammed to construct the later-canceled Cross-Florida Barge Canal, they’re circulating a video that argues it’s smarter to remove much of the aging dam than pay for needed maintenance and upkeep.

The video’s backers say Jacksonville has a lot at stake in the decision.

“The restoration of the Ocklawaha is the most important step to restoring and making the St. Johns River resilient to sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion,” said St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman, whose organization is one of about 40 groups in the coalition.

Proposals to breach dam go back 25 years

The groups are trying to raise their cause’s profile before the Florida Legislature meets in March, although they’re not pushing any legislation about the Ocklawaha.

Earlier proposals to breach the dam, some dating back 25 years,

were derailed by key members of the Legislature committed to protecting a popular sportfishing industry at the Rodman Reservoir.

But the video tries to undermine that resistance, arguing that Rodman's importance as a fishery is declining and quoting an economist projecting better financial returns from restoring the river and promoting outdoor recreation like boating, birding and nature photography.

The video, posted at greatfloridariverway.com, includes state lawmakers – Sens. Audrey Gibson, D-Jacksonville, and Tom Wright, R-Port Orange – and county commissioners from Alachua and Lake counties praising proposals to restore the river's historic condition.

It also features fishermen saying their views have changed.

“I formerly supported retaining Rodman,” Bill Rossi, a bass tournament competitor, says in the hour-and-fourminute program. “[B]ut then I became not just a supporter, but a strong supporter of restoring the Ocklawaha. It seems to me that the cost of retaining Rodman is very much too high.”



Lisa Rinaman.
Photo by Jim
Tatum.

Coalition members have begun conversations with politicians and

groups that feel a stake in the areas around the Ocklawaha, which in April was named one of America's most endangered rivers by the national American Rivers organization.

"It is a slow process," said Margaret Hankinson Spontak, a Marion County resident who chairs the Ocklawaha coalition. "Not everybody is going to get on board. But we need to listen."

The video is meant to encourage interest in a plan that has been called "partial restoration:" removing about 2,000 feet of the earthen dam, filling a man-made cut and letting the river return to a winding natural channel.

Supporters tout removing the dam as a step that would help three waterways – the Silver River in Marion County, the Ocklawaha and the St. Johns – by reestablishing connections that marine life depended on before the dam was created in 1968.

The Silver feeds into the Ocklawaha, which is also fed by headwaters in Central Florida's Green Swamp and by water originating in Lake Apopka, producing the St. Johns' largest tributary.

Backers say reconnecting the three rivers will allow easy movement of fish including striped bass, American shad, mullet and channel and white catfish, and could draw manatees to inland areas they can only reach now by traveling through man-made locks.

Breaching the dam would lower water levels along miles of waterway between the dam and Eureka in

Marion County, and backers say doing that would allow people to experience about 20 natural springs that are now hidden under the reservoir. Some, like Cannon Springs, were visible again and drew visitors when reservoir levels were temporarily drawn down

early this year for plant control that's done every few years.

Springs vent water from aquifers underground, but the video quotes a geologist saying the flow would increase by up to 150 million gallons a day without the reservoir covering them.

That added flow of fresh water reaching the St. Johns is something Rinaman and other activists have argued would be critical in downstream areas like Jacksonville to offset rising salinity as higher sea levels push into river's mouth at Mayport.

They say returning the river to its historic level would also allow 7,500 flooded acres that used to be forested floodplains to become forest again and provide a wildlife corridor, and that 8,000 acres would become valuable wetlands again.

Restoration backers such as Defenders of Wildlife and American Rivers are hoping the video will be shared and generate talk that will reach politicians before Gov. Ron DeSantis and state lawmakers work out plans for next year's budget.

They're also circulating requests for people to email DeSantis to show their support for restoration.

Coalition members "want to get the governor's attention," Rinaman said.