

War On The Peace: Water Wars Heating Up

June 1, 2018



Florida's long-standing policy of giving away limitless amounts of water to whomever asks may be in for changes. Future usage plans show shortcomings based on our present withdrawal rate, developers are knocking at the door, and water managers have incurred the ire of environmentalists concerned about a dried-up Florida.

We might say that the authorities in Florida who control our water are beginning to undergo a learning period where they are exposed to graphic reality rather than an image in their minds.

Up to now they have been very slow students, unable to visualize

their drinking glass being nearly empty. Once the realization hits them, they may be a bit more reluctant to unanimously vote in approval for large developments bringing more residents demanding more water.

Read the original article in the [Sarasota Herald Tribune](#).

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

-A river is like a life: once taken, it cannot be brought back-

Authority expects \$550,000 bill in fight over future water withdrawals

By [Dale White](#)

Staff Writer

Posted May 31, 2018 at 10:44 AM Updated May 31, 2018 at 10:45 AM

A regional authority that supplies drinking water to North Port as well as the counties of Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto expects to spend up to \$550,000 to defend its plan to increase withdrawals from the Peace River. Seven government entities in upstream Polk County recently filed legal challenges to block that expansion plan.

The board of the Peace River-Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority spent nearly a half hour Wednesday in a closed-door session with its attorney, Douglas Manson, to discuss the pending cases. It then reconvened a public meeting to authorize payments to Manson's Tampa-based firm for its defense.

Sitting as the authority's board, Sarasota County Commissioner Alan Maio, Manatee County Commissioner Priscilla Whisenant Trace, DeSoto County Commissioner Elton A. Langford and Charlotte County Commissioner Ken Doherty approved the potential expenses unanimously. They did not publicly discuss the litigation.

Manson, however, said allegations that the authority worked on its expansion plan without public knowledge for several years are without merit. He noted that the project, which involves creation of a third, offstream reservoir at the treatment plant in DeSoto County, has been in the agency's master plan since 2015, a topic of several public meetings of the authority and Southwest Florida Water Management District and referenced in articles and legal notices in area newspapers.

The regional authority supplies millions of gallons of drinking water daily to the residents it serves.

Currently, the authority's permits from the water management district commonly called Swiftmud allow it to withdraw a maximum 120 million gallons a day from the river during the rainy season, most of which is stored in reservoirs and underground to be tapped during dry months. It has contracts to provide up to 34.8 million gallons daily to its four customers.

The authority wants Swiftmud to update its permits to allow up to 258 million gallons to be diverted daily from the river and for it to eventually supply its customers with up to 80 million gallons a day.

"We take less water than we could" during the rainy seasons, Manson said.

Authority Executive Director Patrick Lehman previously noted that, during Hurricane Irma in September 2017, the utility could

have captured an estimated 19 billion gallons that flowed past its intake pipes – but it lacked the storage capacity.

The withdrawal increases are contingent on the authority adding capacity to its treatment plant and creating an additional reservoir that could store 6 billion gallons.

On May 22, the Swiftmud governing board intended to authorize the updated permits.

However, the Polk Regional Water Cooperative, Polk County and the municipalities of Lakeland, Fort Meade, Wauchula, Bartow and Winter Haven filed petitions with the management district to block approval. They want an administrative law judge to hear why they oppose such a large increase in withdrawals from the river.

The staff of Swiftmud are currently assessing whether those petitions meet legal criteria. If so, they will forward the requests to the Florida Division of Administrative Hearings.

Currently, the Peace River authority oversees the only reservoirs on that 105-mile waterway extending through Polk, Hardee, DeSoto and Charlotte counties. Polk County and its cities largely rely on ground water.

In 2016, Polk County and 15 of that county's 17 municipalities formed the Polk Regional Water Cooperative to jointly explore the creation of other water sources. According to the cooperative's complaint, "traditional groundwater supplies may be insufficient to satisfy the existing and future water supply demand of Polk County in a sustainable manner."

On May 10, the cooperative filed for a Swiftmud permit to draw an average 18 million gallons a day from the Peace River at a location near Fort Meade and up to 50 million gallons daily

during “high flow conditions.”

In [its petition](#), it states its water use request, when combined with the authority’s application, would reduce the minimal flow needed to sustain the lower Peace River.

The cooperative claims state law requires the downstream authority to consider impacts of its withdrawals on the source of that water. It notes that the river originates in Polk County, drawing from Lake Hancock and the confluence of the Peace Creek Drainage Canal and Saddle Creek, and that 23 percent of its watershed is within that county.

Timeline

1982: Sarasota, Manatee, DeSoto and Charlotte counties form the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Authority, with an initial mission of connecting their water systems.

1991: The authority acquires General Development Utilities’ water treatment plant on the Peace River after the company goes into bankruptcy. The property comes with an 80-acre reservoir that holds 500 million gallons of water diverted from the river.

1992: The Southwest Florida Water Management District acquires land for a second reservoir.

2009: That square-mile reservoir with a capacity for 6 billion gallons comes online. The authority will also have invested in an aquifer storage and recovery system of 21 wells that holds another 6 billion gallons underground.

Currently: The authority’s permits from the water management district allow it to withdraw a maximum of 120 million gallons a day from the river, most of which is stored for the dry season. It has contracts to provide up to 34.8 million gallons daily to

North Port and the counties of Sarasota, Charlotte and DeSoto.

Pending: Although it does not need the additional supply now, the authority wants to add another square-mile reservoir to store 6 billion gallons. That third reservoir could provide another 15 million gallons a day. Several upstream government entities in Polk County are challenging the authority's permit applications, saying they expect to need to withdraw water from the river.