

What's our next move?

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John Quarterman is the Suwannee Riverkeeper, and as such, is working harder than anyone to reach a solution to these serious and on-going problems. Valdosta is also working and spending money but not getting the job done.

This may be an example of a city wanting more and more people, but not being able to accommodate them. It may no longer be a matter of everyone just moving over a bit and adjusting, but a matter health and survival.

Does this sound familiar? Like Florida?

What will happen when all of our water is non-drinkable? That is the end of the road where we are heading. The people who are

causing it here and now will be gone so it is not their worry, say they.

If all of Georgia and the City of Valdosta were to join WWALS, perhaps the money would be better spent on finding a solution than what they are doing now.

Sorry, Lake City Reporter does not provide a link to the article.

Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.

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

Valdosta Sewage Spills

What's our next move?



John
Quarterman

A December upsurge of raw sewage spills from the city of Valdosta, Georgia, has a dozen downstream counties organized into a Task Force, demanding action from Florida state legislators. But what action? I recommend first getting a grip on the extent of the problem, funding keeping that picture up to date, and then funding fixes.

Valdosta spilled not just twice, but two dozen times in December, totaling more than six million gallons of raw sewage. And Tifton, Quitman, and Lowndes County also spilled. We know

this because the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GA-EPD) is publishing statewide spill reports each business day, after a campaign by Suwannee Riverkeeper's umbrella organization, WWALS Watershed Coalition (WWALS), involving 30 Florida and Georgia organizations.

Valdosta's weekly river water quality testing shows bacterial contamination even when there are no spills, but Valdosta is reducing its testing from weekly to only monthly. WWALS has started a water quality monitoring program, to see how far spills affect the rivers, when the rivers are affected without spills, and what are the other sources of contamination. The state of Florida is doing a surprising amount of testing, especially at springs. Yet there are gaps from the state line downstream.

The state of Florida could fund and direct the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to fill those gaps. The Georgia legislature could fund and direct the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GA-EPD) to test regularly upstream and downstream of Valdosta, Tifton, and Quitman. Or, since Valdosta is by far the biggest source of sewage spills, maybe GA-EPD could direct Valdosta to do further testing (or to fund it) as part of the consent decree GA-EPD already has with Valdosta.

In December the Valdosta City Council authorized another quarter million dollars in sewer system improvements, including a Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition system for fast internal notification. That would have been useful last January, when a spill that could have been stopped ran for hours.

What else wasn't already in place? The December rains that overflowed Valdosta, Quitman and Lowndes County were not even double the average monthly summer rains. Should we expect more

spills this summer? All Suwannee River Basin cities need to plan for peak projected rain, not just average.

We need risk management. We are all appreciative of the \$60 million Valdosta already spent on sewer system improvements and more to be spent. However, as by far the biggest city in the Suwannee River Basin, Valdosta has a responsibility to finish the job. Florida (and Georgia) legislators could help by allocating funds.

In Florida, water quality testing funds are the most obvious. In Georgia, testing and more sewer system improvement money would help. Threats of lawsuits have gotten attention to the problem, and this all may result in lawsuits. Then testing and funding will still be needed. So let's start with testing and funding.

John S. Quarterman is president of WWALS Watershed Coalition, a conservation group named after the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little and Suwannee Rivers.