

An estimated 28 million people will live in Florida by 2030, up from 17 million in 2005. With a growing population, Florida is challenged to ensure an adequate water supply and to protect the state's natural resources, such as our wetlands, lakes and rivers. In the St. Johns River Water Management District alone, public supply water demand is expected to nearly double by 2025.

Water conservation is the cornerstone of sustaining Florida's water supply and will continue to play a vitally important role. Mandatory water conservation has been in effect in the District's 18 counties for more than 16 years through limiting lawn and landscape irrigation hours to before 10 a.m. or after 4 p.m. The District strengthened the watering rule in March 2009 with new restrictions specifying the days of the week for landscape irrigation. Under these permanent restrictions, landscape irrigation is limited to two days a week during daylight saving time and one day a week during Eastern Standard Time.

While conservation alone will not solve all our water supply challenges, it could delay the need for more expensive and challenging alternatives. The District continues to ask local governments to adopt our model ordinance to help enforce the irrigation rule.

In many areas, the supply of fresh groundwater from the Floridan aquifer (the main source of drinking water within the District) is reaching its sustainable limits, or will reach these limits in the near future and will not be able to meet all future needs. The District will not permit water withdrawals that will cause unacceptable impacts to water resources. To this end, the District has capped the amount of water that can be withdrawn from the aquifer system in central Florida in order to protect the region's wetlands, lakes, and springs from harm. The cap will reflect water demands through 2013, and other alternative water sources will be necessary to accommodate additional growth.

The District has no authority to control local growth. That is a decision made by local governments. Rather, the District's role is to identify sustainable water sources, including alternative water supply sources that can be developed and used to meet growing water demands without resulting in unacceptable impacts.

Currently, central Florida utilities are considering the development of supplemental water sources that include seawater, brackish groundwater, reclaimed water, and surface water from rivers, including the St. Johns and Ocklawaha rivers.

These proposals to capture a limited quantity of surface water from the rivers have generated significant public interest and discussion. In addition to providing you with the facts, I offer you my commitment that the District will not permit river withdrawals without considering and addressing concerns over our rivers' health.

Despite rumors to the contrary, the District is not planning to build pipelines from north Florida to south or central Florida, and we are not considering proposals that would "drain" the St. Johns or Ocklawaha rivers.

District staff believe, based on years of scientific investigation, that there is a limited amount of water that can be withdrawn from the St. Johns River to supplement groundwater to meet central Florida's needs. Limited quantities of water may also be available from the Ocklawaha River to serve the future needs of nearby communities. Discussions are in the early stages, and proposed withdrawal amounts are not precisely known at this time.

In our work to develop minimum flows and levels (MFLs) for the St. Johns River, the District has investigated what potential harm could be caused downstream by allowing surface water withdrawals from the river's upper and middle basins, those areas between Sanford and Indian River County.

A 2006–2007 MFL study concluded that a maximum cumulative withdrawal of 155 million gallons per day, which could include potential withdrawals near Lake Monroe and the St. Johns River near DeLand, would not harm downstream estuarine resources to the north, would not significantly increase salinity, and would not adversely impact dissolved oxygen concentrations in the river.

However, additional investigations are under way — particularly further study on the potential for unacceptable impacts to the Lower St. Johns River Basin, downstream of the withdrawals. The District is currently conducting a comprehensive investigation on the potential environmental impact of river water withdrawals on the lower St. Johns River.

The river water withdrawal issue is of great interest and public concern, and we are committed to comprehensively investigating the possible environmental effects of proposed withdrawals on the St. Johns River system. The District is very familiar with the current status of utility planning for regional projects proposing river withdrawals, and based on this knowledge, we do not expect any completed permit applications that would require District action prior to the completion of our current study.

In addition, as part of adopting a tentative budget for fiscal year 2009–2010, the District's Governing Board strengthened the agency's commitment to water conservation and delayed funding allocations for construction of river water withdrawal projects until the completion of these environmental protection studies. In the FY 2009–2010 tentative budget, no new construction funding was allocated to proposed river water withdrawal projects.

While our initial research has shown that limited withdrawals would result in little or no change to the rivers, we recognize and share your concerns. We must be confident that the rivers will not be harmed before we issue permits. Our decisions will be based on the best available science, including participation of outside experts. Furthermore, our study of the environmental effects of potential surface water withdrawals is undergoing extensive peer review by the National Research Council, the operating arm of the National Academy of Science, representing the highest level of scientific and academic credibility on these types of issues.

I invite you to visit the special surface water section of our Web site, at floridaswater.com/surfacewaterwithdrawals, to review the facts and the existing study information. Please feel free to contact my staff or me if you have additional questions.

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St. Johns River Water Management District