

WE SAY NO!
THE HOMOSASSA RIVER SYSTEM IS TOO SENSITIVE FOR ANY FURTHER REDUCTION
BY
SWFWMD OR REGIONAL WELLFIELDS
by Priscilla Watkins for the
Homosassa River Alliance

The huge, negative public response to Southwest Florida Water Management District's (SWFWMD) staff recommendations to set the flow level for the Homosassa River at 5% of its "estimated average" flow of 152 cubic feet per second (cfs) or 144.4 cfs has, so far, delayed the scheduled Board vote of approval.

Questions and criticisms of the findings, omissions and methodology have come from experts in water management and commercial fishermen, state regulators, public park managers, engineers, boaters, HRA's volunteer reviewers and other of our members, and even from SWFWMD's hand-selected peer review team. It was a huge response to a technical manual over a very short time span.

So far on the supporting side, there is the lone voice of the county director of Water Resources who appears to have only read the two-page executive summary and asked for clarification on the parameters and salinity terminology before sending in a letter of approval.

Concurrently, there has been an outpouring of opposition to the proposed flow rate being recommended for the Chassahowitzka River system, an 11% reduction. The Chassahowitzka is approximately five miles south of the Homosassa and it draws from the same aquifer whose water source is rainfall over the same 270-square-mile springshed.

Both the Homosassa and the Chassahowitzka are first-magnitude spring systems, two of four along a thirty-five mile span of our coastline, with only 27 first-magnitude springs in the entire state of Florida. Springs such as these are rare.

WHAT WE OBJECT TO, IN BRIEF

We believe the historical river flow has already been reduced to a critical point; any further reduction would contradict all the efforts and funds spent to date to protect this coastal area. Lower flow will destroy many species and the delicate ecology of our river and its estuary.

One point we noted particularly was the higher salinity rates now in place as compared to twenty, thirty and fifty years ago. Larger draw-downs from our aquifer will increase that salinity yet the consequences were brushed aside. The only thing they admitted was the extreme sensitivity of creatures in the river system to the slightest change in flow - any draw-down will trigger "significant harm."

We pointed out that the river has suffered a severe drop in flow rate already but the report attributes that to rainfall patterns only. We feel that rapidly increasing population rates since 1960 have made a major impact yet SWFWMD, using models, determined there is only a slightly less than one percent impact to the Homosassa flow from pumping. For that 1% impact we must look at the time span chosen.

The time span chosen to average spring flow at 152 cfs ignored historic records on three of the vents going back to 1931 and *based its data on flow rates from 1995 through 2009 only*. The Florida Almanac 2002-2003 edition put the average flow at 192 cfs; its 2007-2008 editions lowered that to 175 cfs (drops of 20 and 16%). The United States Geological Survey folks, who measure the flow, also recognize a 20-25% drop has already occurred over the past decade. Furthermore, it is impossible to measure the river flow accurately; USGS says that those flow meter measurements are only accurate within ten to fifteen percent, at best. Whose word will we have to take that only 5% is used – that of residents looking at the river daily or SWFWMD staff in Brooksville?

One more point about flow rate measures: SWFWMD's calculation for the South Fork spring is based on a flow measurement of the aquifer level in Weeki Wachee, twenty-five miles away with the Chassahowitzka system between them.

Another serious question that needs answering is this: what aquifer amount has SWFWMD based its water availability on? At one point in time we were thought to be water-rich but that was incorrect. As our vice-president, Ron Miller, reminded SWFWMD staff, their own man, John Parker, in 1998 said the earlier reports of 750 to 1,250 feet of potable water in Citrus and Marion counties was overestimated by a factor of three to six. For most of Citrus County the potable lens is generally 200 to 250 feet thick or less. If the allotments are based on that old faulty data we are in really serious trouble.

We also pressed for more serious consideration to the effect on the estuary and all of our protected areas, whether preserves or parks. This impact was barely mentioned.

SETTING LEVELS – WHO CARES?

It is a big deal. Florida may have twenty-seven first magnitude springs (at least 100 cfs flow) but on the Gulf side of the state five of the big ones are concentrated right here: three in Citrus County and one each in northern Hernando County and in Dunnellon, Marion County. They are a major attraction for visitors, retirees and wildlife. If the balance is upset and the "harm" spirals out of control, we won't be able to do a quick fix, if we can do any fix at all. SWFWMD has already issued reports for three first magnitude rivers in our immediate neighborhood - Weeki Wachee, Chassahowitzka, and the Homosassa. In process are reports on Crystal River, another first magnitude spring system, and three segments of the Withlacoochee River, which runs 86 miles and feeds the Tsala Apopka chain of lakes. Rainbow Springs in Dunnellon, a really massive first-magnitude system, feeds into the Withlacoochee. Incomplete documentation, minimalized impact, and incorrect measures matter greatly as all the water management districts prepare for a greater allocation of our water resources. We have to pay attention to this.

HOW DOES THIS AFFECT RESIDENTS AND BUSINESSES?

We require potable water to survive and most of our businesses require water in either their processes or at least in providing clean surroundings. While we have a law on the books that says each county must use its own water sources first, it doesn't say "uses them wisely or conservatively." Penalties are almost non-existent, there are no water police.

It appears the goal of the flow plans is to tap the aquifer for all it is worth for state uses but not to benefit the residents and businesses now in Citrus County nor to the ecosystems that our rivers support. The Withlacoochee Regional Water Supply Authority has site plans in print for regional distribution well fields running down the county east of US19. We believe this water will go south to serve over-developed counties and perhaps destined to be bottled by a for-profit company with little or no monetary gain and much potential damage for our county.

Remember that for the past two decades we have been beating off attempts by one area or another trying to grab our water? Well, setting low flow levels will give the state WMD data to show "there's plenty there" and we are only doing 15% harm! Drought is a regular occurrence in Florida, taking all that you can is poor long-term planning when our rivers are already stressed from a long stretch of droughts.

WHAT IS HRA'S STAKE IN THIS?

Our focus is on The Homosassa River system (four rivers and at least 19 springs), which is under severe stress. We, the county, plus state and federal governments have been working together to identify contributors to the river stress and protect the 270 square mile spring shed from further or

new contaminants. To that end, certain areas around the Homosassa River system (and our other local first magnitude spring systems) have been identified, studied and placed under protection. We have St. Martin's Marsh Preserve, Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, Crystal River State Archeological Site, Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park, and the entire Big Bend Preserve, which protects the estuarine systems from Apalachicola to the Levy/Citrus border. We have been working for years to control pollutants statewide. If a local, state or national legislative or agency proposal will harm the system or its spring shed, we are going to be heard on the subject.

ARE WE ALONE IN THIS CONCERN?

No. The Chassahowitzka report came out at the same time as ours - SWFWMD proposed an 11% reduction rate on that system. The Chassahowitzka River Restoration Committee, other organizations and individuals are united in vociferous opposition and have forced SWFWMD to delay its presentation to the Board for a vote as well.

Weeki Wachee, already severely degraded with a 16% decline in flow since 1961, had a further 10% reduction proposed in 2008. The report did not include anticipated fish kill rate at a 10% reduction, but said the river could still be home to the entire gulf population of manatees. That side of Hernando County is sparsely populated, and the river is owned by SWFWMD; we missed hearing objections there.

WHAT IS NEXT?

We are asking each of you to call your County Commissioners and the Citrus County Director of Water Resources and urge them to access the Report at www.watermatters.org and all of the public comments that are available online. We hope you will tell them that, after reading the report, they need to let SWFWMD staff know it should be recommending zero percent (0%) reduction in flow on the Homosassa and a complete review of the Chassahowitzka report with a view towards addressing citizens' concerns.

Commissioners, 352-341-6560: Winn Webb, Joe Meek, John Kenney, Dennis Damato, Rebecca Bays.
Water Resources, 352-527-7646: Robert Knight.

We ask you to immediately email SWFWMD with your objection to the rate for Homosassa, telling them 0% should be the level. SWFWMD, Resource Projects Department,
doug.leeper@swfwmd.state.fl.us

We will continue to talk with SWFWMD until our concerns are addressed or the vote is taken. If data is not included or corrected, we will have to move upward in the chain of command. The time is now for our governing bodies of the water distributors and of the county to educate themselves about flow issues and get involved. It will not be long before the state Legislators will be forced to take a public stand.

Sidebars

BACKGROUND

Simply put, SWFWMD is required by state law to set flow rates on all rivers, wetlands and lakes so they can issue water permits or water transfer rights based on what "should" be available in the aquifer. They were to study the systems, measure the flow, research all available data from its own and other agencies, make projections and suggest a level that would, in their own words, *harm no more than 15% of the ecosystem*.

Once flow rates and water levels are approved, SWFWMD (and the other districts in Florida) will use those levels to determine how much more can be pumped from the aquifer and allocated to residents, businesses and industries, above and beyond what is already on the books.

POPULATION GROWTH

Citrus County

1960 9,268

1970 19,196

1980 54,703

1990 93,515

2000 118,085

2009 140,357 estimated