



Special Editorial:

Our Water

by Dan Hilliard

Part 5: Our Future

The quality of our natural systems and waters of the state are our legacy for generations to come and water is our most vital resource.

Collectively we discard vast amounts of water every day, yet now find ourselves in the odd position of prolonged drought cycles, water shortages, failing infrastructure, declining water quality and natural systems. The forecast is continued growth in Florida. The question is whether or not we will maintain our water resources sufficiently to support that growth and maintain our natural systems.

A document released by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission last year referenced a study by A Thousand Friends of Florida which projects a state population of 36,000,000 by the year 2060. It is available online through MyFWC.Com and is entitled ***Wildlife 2060: What's at Stake for Florida?*** Much of this growth will be found along the I75 corridor north of Tampa, extending up to Gainesville and west to the coastal regions.

Where will the water come from? If you live in south Florida the water may come from here. Don't rely on Local Sources First legislation, as ultimately the courts will not bar water transfers if no other alternative is available. If all the Future Land Use Maps in all counties of Florida were to reach build-out, the estimated population of the state would be approximately 86 million people. We cannot come close to supporting such population burdens with current water use management practices.

Where is the water going to come from and at what cost? Dollars are what they are, but other costs present in the form of mutilation of natural systems that are bled dry, climate change and destruction of estuaries because of reduced fresh water flow. This destruction will have considerable and perpetual economic impact. A frightfully expensive impact if one wishes to compute what makes Florida attractive to visitors and new residents. Restoration is exorbitantly expensive as compared to preservation.

What is the cost of the destruction of the sport fishing industry in Florida? Hint: Billions. While many come to visit in the winter, they do so because of favorable weather and surrounding natural environments. "Natural Systems" is what the state calls them. Lakes, rivers, estuaries, the things that make Florida tick. They are the geese that lay the golden eggs and if we lose them, we have lost it all. Imagine Homosassa without the Springs. Turbid stagnant water does not make a tourist destination. Imagine Crystal River opaque, and then pause to consider what this will do to county tax roll values.

Today's path has been demonstrated in south Florida to be a failure, and like a cancer, that failure will spread until the whole system we call Florida chokes on its own dust and collapses. Is this what we want? Might it not serve the benefit of the state to recognize its obligations to the people and our future rather than continue contribution to systematic destruction of your water resources? It might serve us well to begin aggressively upgrading water quantity and quality before we dig a hole into oblivion.

One small first step is simple; balance the water budget. Supply must meet demand, drought notwithstanding. Step two might require collective recognition that we are all in this together; citizens, industry and agriculture alike. We should recognize the intricate relationship between natural systems, resources such as water and economic prosperity. Water should be considered as valuable as wetlands and processes be established that require much higher efficiencies of use. Both resources should be protected very aggressively. The depletion of these resources is not in our best interests and should no longer be tolerated.

Regulations might be considered that provide incentives to vertical development rather than sprawl, thus reducing demand for irrigation. Rewarding conservation in a financial sense may provide large scale incentive to facilitate this change. Perhaps it is time to examine the concept of water credits. It is reasonable to conclude there is no single silver bullet which will resolve the issues, but a healthy dose of pragmatic common sense might. Is there any understanding that we cannot live beyond our means? It works with money and it can work with water. It is time to raise the bar!

When the people of this state let their legislators know where their priorities lay, we will have taken a big step in solving some of these problems. At present however, we are writing resource checks future generations won't be able to cash.

Cynthia Barnett, *Mirage* University of Michigan Press 2007, 15

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4 PBS&J, Peace River Cumulative Impact Study, 2007

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