

# One of most protected rivers in nation is still in decline

October 15 2012, by Kevin Spear

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The Wekiva River, which has been in failing health for a long time, is getting sicker despite being one of the most protected waterways in the nation and the most treasured in the Orlando, Fla., area.

The spring-fed river is tainted with pollution from fertilizer and sewage that has caused a smothering growth of [harmful algae](#). At the same time, utilities are pumping significant amounts of Floridan Aquifer water that would otherwise flow from springs into the Wekiva, leaving what many fear is a river too shriveled for wildlife and plants.

The ailments have grown intolerably blatant to legions of Wekiva defenders, who began fighting for it decades ago.

"I'm frustrated at not knowing how to stop it," said Nancy Prine, an early member of the Friends of the Wekiva River, a small group that has pulled off victories that spared the river from even further degradation.

Awareness of the river's plight has been magnified by [public concern](#) that most of the state's spring-fed river systems are similarly stricken by declining flows and pollution.

But members of the Friends of the Wekiva River were alarmed as far back as the early 1980s about the river's condition. They have been promised many times since that the Wekiva would be studied and restored.

Those same assurances were repeated last month, when the St. Johns River Water Management District said more scientific examination is needed of a river system fed by 30 springs.

"Springs are complex ecosystems," said Hans Tanzler, executive director of the district. "Ecological and hydrological data are often sparse or lacking, and expanding data collection is often challenging and expensive."

Tanzler was responding to a scathingly critical and technically detailed letter from the Center for Earth Jurisprudence at Barry University School of Law near Orlando.

Center director and law professor Sister Patricia Siemen and Robert Williams, a Tallahassee lawyer with the center, blasted the district in August for not acting on several studies during many years that documented weakening springs and rising pollution.

"The district ignored the warning and did nothing," stated Siemen and Williams, who in interviews acknowledged they are relative newcomers to the Wekiva's issues. They lauded the work of Friends of the Wekiva River and others but said they could no longer not challenge abuses of the river.

They contend in their letter that the river's main spring, named Wekiwa, and several contributing ones have dwindled this year to less than safe flows as determined by the district and later confirmed by other scientists.

The minimum amount of water that should be flowing from the popular Wekiwa Springs is 40 million gallons a day, according to the district. Siemen and Williams pointed out the average daily flow this year declined to 35 million gallons.

The two lawyers called for restoration of the minimum flow "as soon as is practicable."

The district says the appropriate response to the trend of declining spring flows includes a Springs Protection Initiative that won't be as urgent as what river defenders want.

"The initiative would also include a multi-year scientific investigation . . . to provide a scientific foundation to develop cost-effective approaches," Tanzler stated in a letter last month.

The water district has been sharply downsized by unprecedented budget cuts under Gov. Rick Scott.

Tanzler also said that, even though the daily flow of Wekiwa Springs dropped this year to below 40 million gallons, it remains to be seen whether that's an acceptable temporary dip from drought or a harmful long-term shift caused by pumping for water.

Utilities owned by cities and counties have been a rising political force in recent years able to push for more control of public waters.

As for pollution worries, the state Department of Environmental Protection determined in 2008 that the maximum amount of nitrate - a nitrogen-related chemical from sewage and fertilizers - that won't trigger an invasion of harmful algae is a tiny and invisible 280 parts per billion.

Wekiwa Springs is now plagued with five times that much nitrate, coming from stormwater runoff, sewage plants, septic tanks and lawn fertilizers, and seeping into the ground and into the Floridan Aquifer, according to state figures.

DEP is proposing to reduce nitrate to the acceptable limit within 15

years, a cleanup likely to be one of the state's biggest environmental challenges ever.

The river's plight runs counter to many years of public and private efforts to protect it.

In 2000, the Wekiva was designated a Wild and Scenic River, one of only two in Florida. State lawmakers have restricted development near the river. And Florida and local agencies have purchased as a buffer more than 70,000 acres of Wekiva wilderness, an area larger than the city of Orlando.

Friends of the Wekiva River has joined forces often with major groups, including Audubon, Sierra and the Nature Conservancy, on behalf of the river.

"It's well worth fighting for," Prine said.

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