

# Water First North Florida (WFNF), FL SB 64, Desalination, and planted pine ditches

John S. Quarterman, **Suwannee RIVERKEEPER**<sup>®</sup>

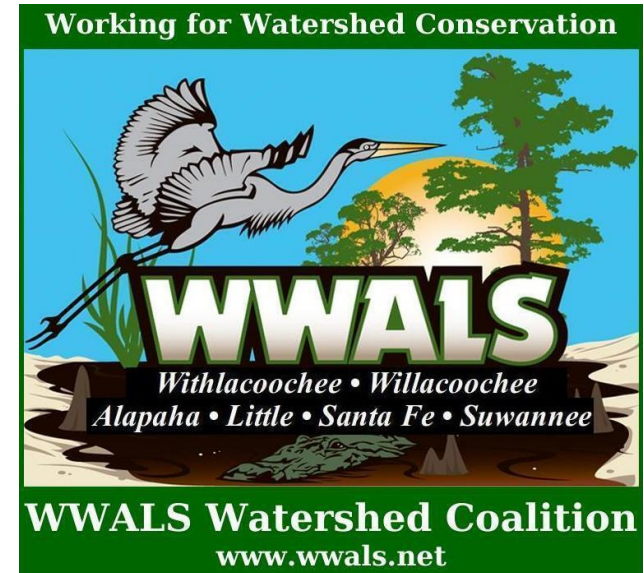
and Executive Director



**WWALS Watershed Coalition, Inc.**  
**(WWALS)**

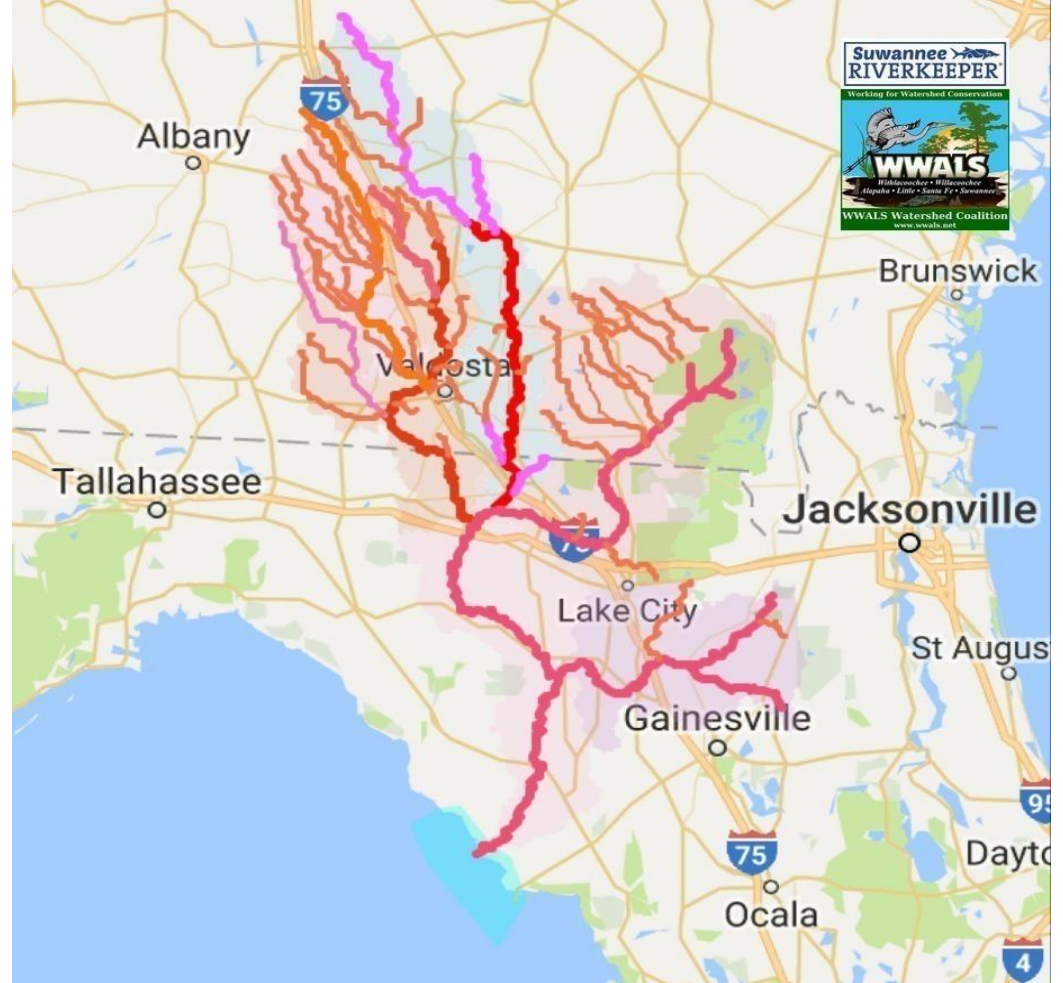
a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, est. 2012,  
for clean water

In the 10,000-square-mile Suwannee  
River Basin  
in Georgia and Florida



# Suwannee River Basin and Estuary

More area than any  
of six states  
Less population  
than any state



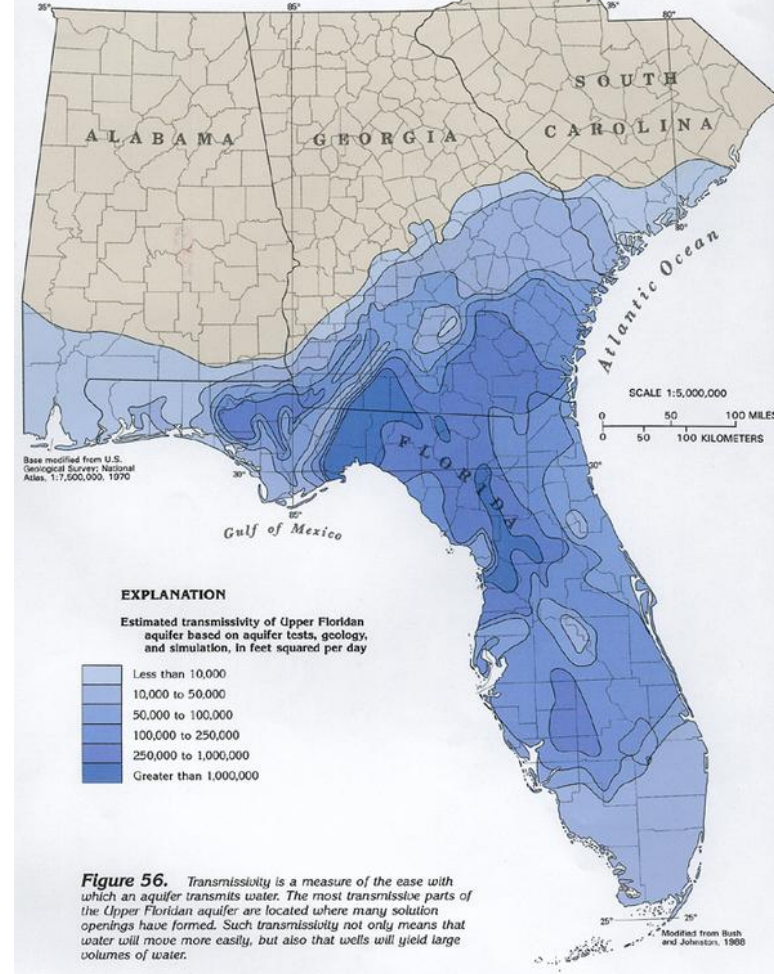
**WWALS Vision:** A healthy watershed with clean, swimmable, fishable, drinkable water.

**WWALS Mission:**

WWALS advocates for conservation and stewardship of the surface waters and groundwater of the Suwannee River Basin and Estuary, in south Georgia and north Florida, among them the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little, Santa Fe, and Suwannee River watersheds, through education, awareness, environmental monitoring, and citizen activities.

# Floridan Aquifer

Basis of all our drinking water, agriculture, and industry



# Rick Davis, chair of the River contamination Task Force of the dozen downstream Florida counties

Spoke about the more than \$160 million Valdosta has spent fixing its sewer system

- He urged more water quality testing by Valdosta

WWALS thanks Lowndes County for no sewage spills in years.

- Thanks to Valdosta for fewer spills that don't last as long.
- Thanks to GA-EPD for the daily Sewage Spills Report,
- after WWALS got 30 GA & FL orgs to propose it in 2018.

**Please fully fund Georgia Environmental Protection Division**



2025-10-06--GA-EPD-Sewage-Spills-Report.html by [WWALS Watershed Coalition](https://wwals.net/issues/www/ga-spills); see <https://wwals.net/issues/www/ga-spills>

FACILITY NAME	BEGIN DATE	COUNTY	CITY	OVERFLOW LOCATION	QUANTITY GALLONS	OVERFLOW TYPE	PERMIT NUMBER	SPILL SOURCE	CAUSE	RIVER BASIN	WATERWAY IMPACTED	OVERFLOW DESTINATION
Valdosta, City of (Withlacoochee WPCP)	2025-08-23	Lowndes	Valdosta	1212 Wainwright Drive Valdosta, Georgia 31601	20,000	Raw Sewage	GA0033235	Collection System	Hurricane or Large Stormwater Event, High Levels of Inflow, Inadequate Treatment Plant Capacity High Levels of Inflow,	Savannah	One Mile Branch	Spill Waters of the State
Valdosta, City of (Withlacoochee WPCP)	2025-08-24	Lowndes	Valdosta	3180 Wetherington Lane Valdosta, Georgia 31601	1,500,000	Raw Sewage	GA0033235	WWTP	Aging Infrastructure, Hurricane or Large Stormwater Event, High Levels of Inflow, Inadequate Treatment Plant Capacity High Levels of Inflow, Inadequate TWTDS Capacity Due to Stormwater Event,	Savannah	Withlacoochee River	Spill Waters of the State

# Stigma

Not downstream from Valdosta:

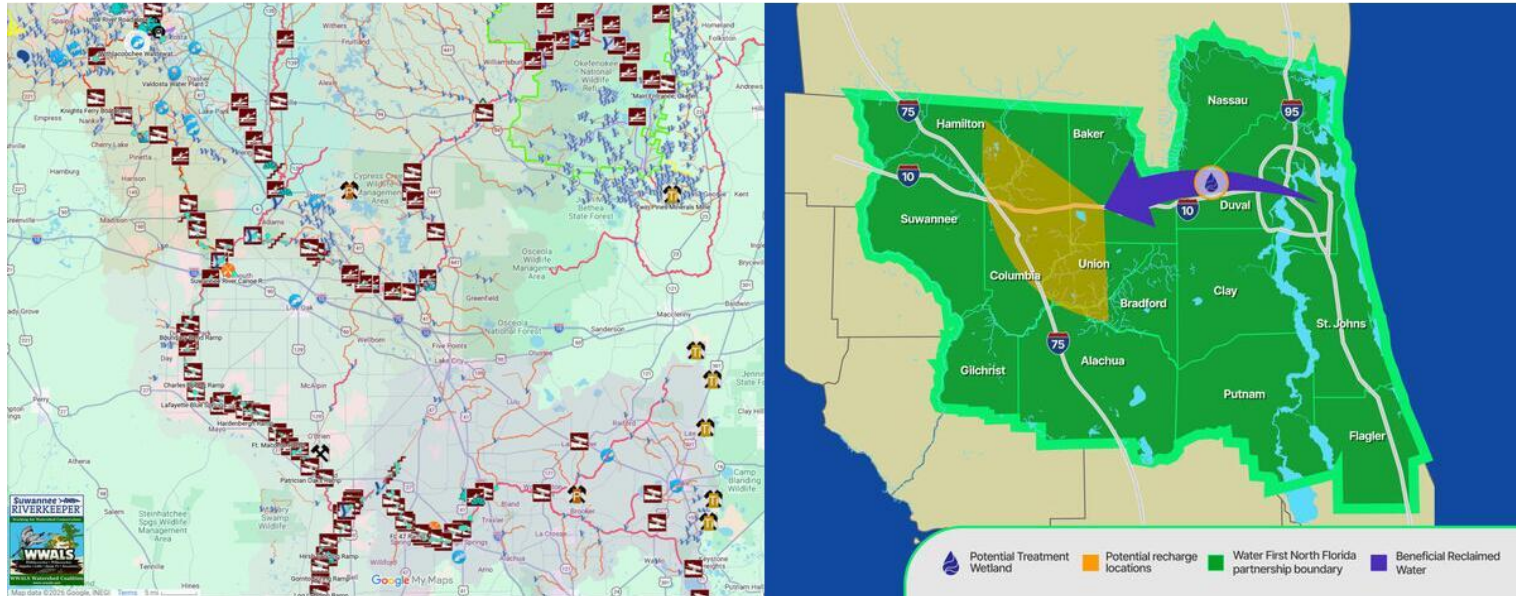
- Suwannee River upstream from the Alapaha
- Ichetucknee River
- Santa Fe River
- New River

Yet **all 12 SRWMD counties**

Are represented on the Task Force:

- **Sewage reputation affects them all.**

The Suwannee River Basin in Florida is downstream from Valdosta's wastewater spills  
Should it also be downstream from Jacksonville?

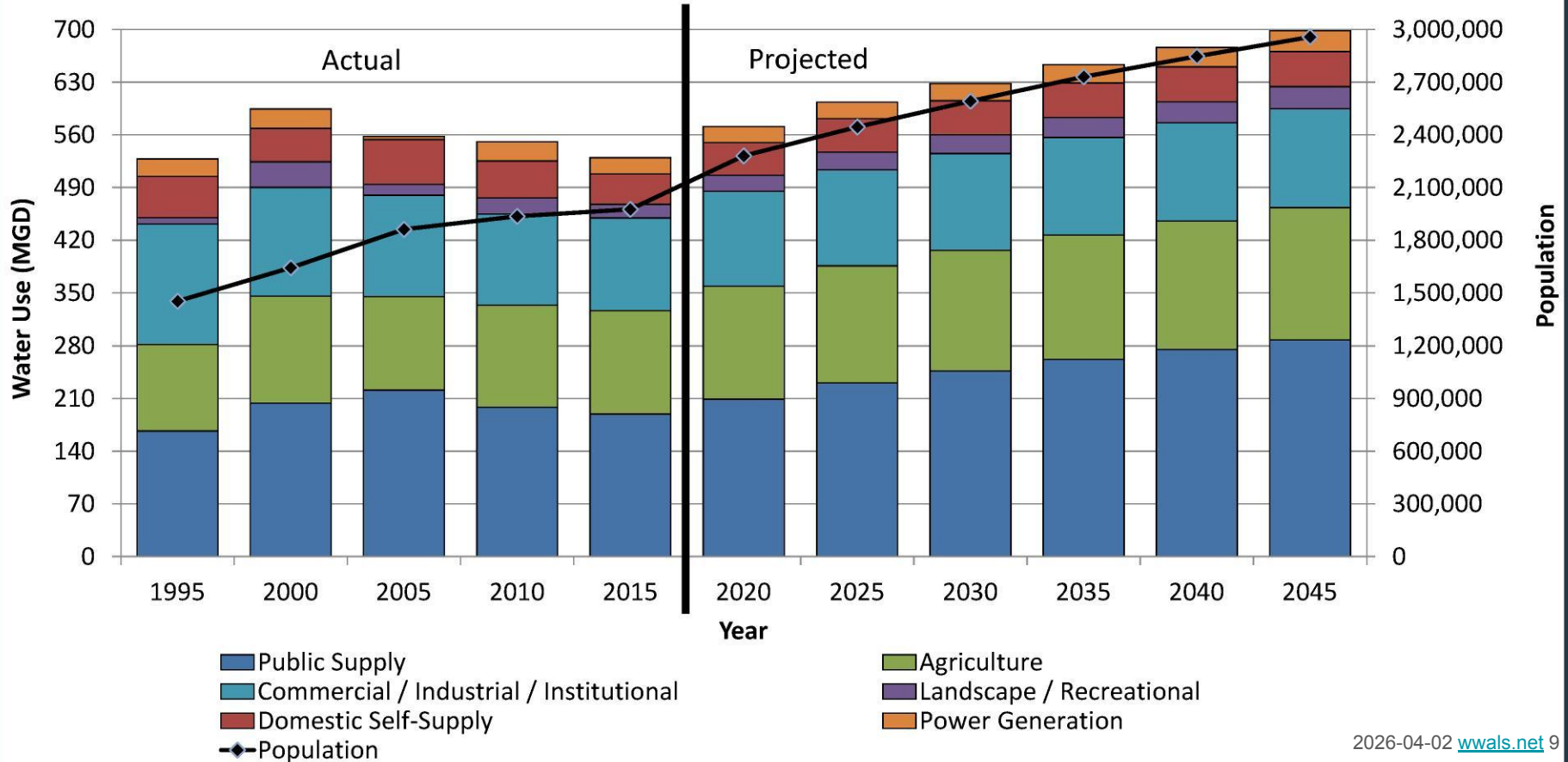


What problem needs solving?

SRWMD and SJRWMD say  
increasing water demand is the problem

What is projected to increase the most:  
“Public Supply”

# Historic Water Use and Population -vs- Projected Water Demand and Population in NFRWSP



Demand and population where?

The area of the  
**North Florida Regional Water Supply Partnership  
(NFRWSP)**

Much of the area of  
**Suwannee River Water Management District  
(SRWMD)**

**St Johns River Water Management District  
(SJRWMD)**

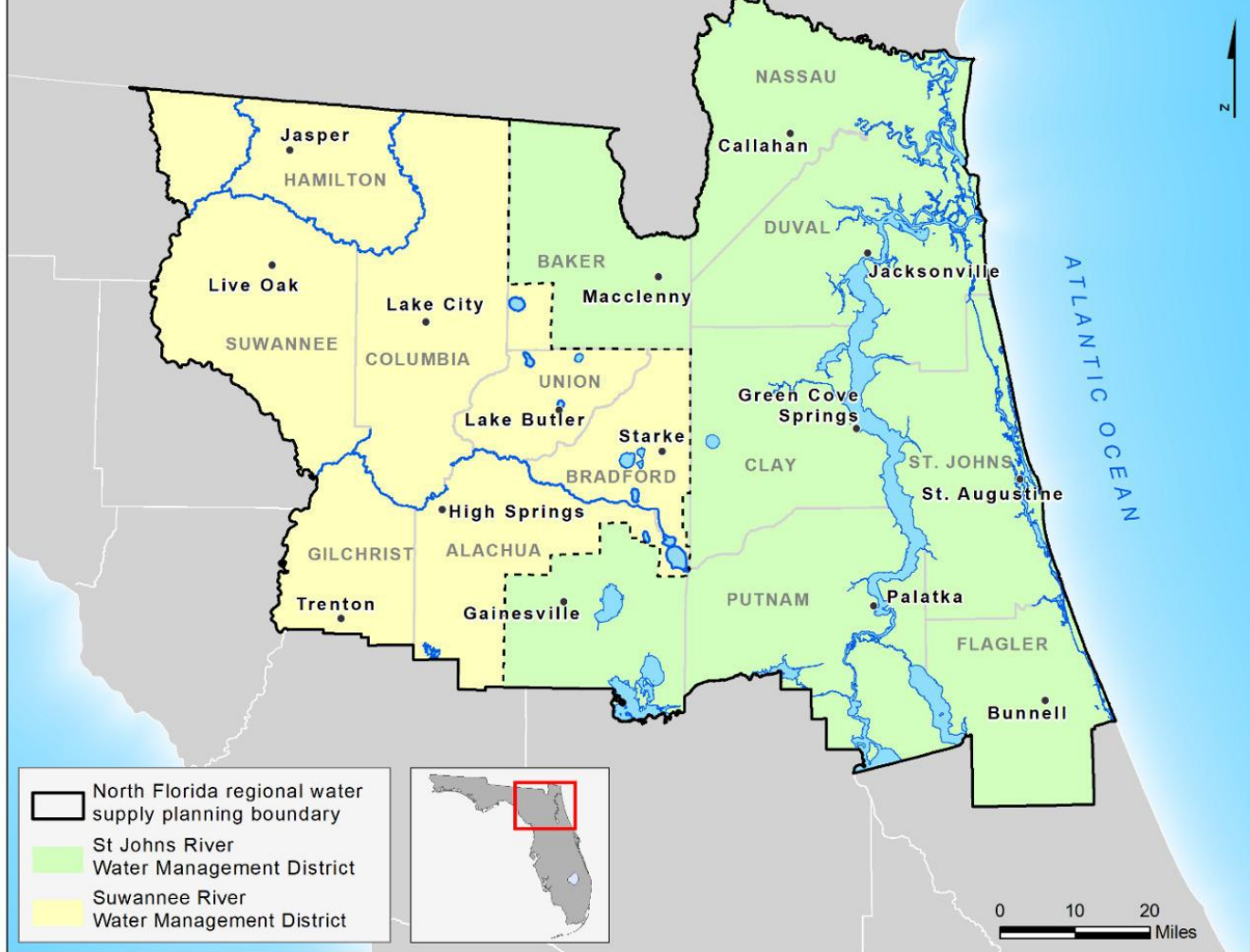
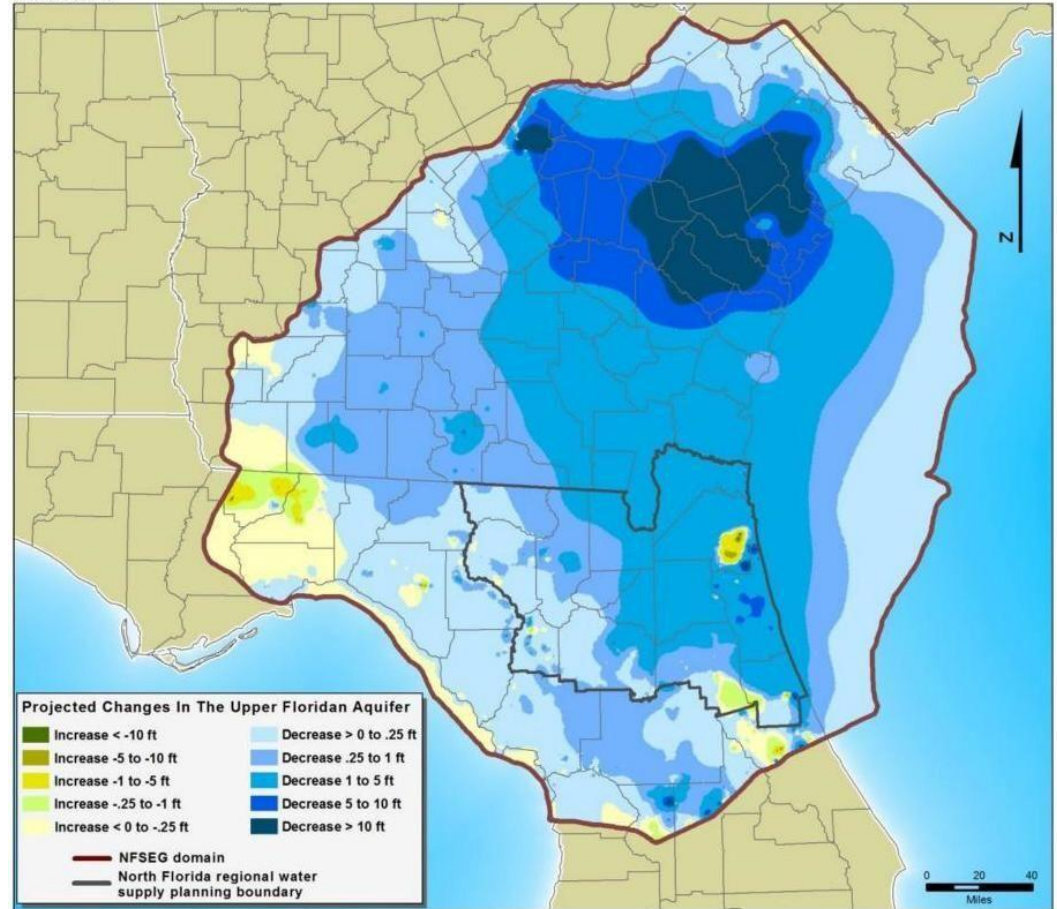


Figure 2. North Florida Regional Water Supply Partnership area

The island of higher  
aquifer water  
around JAX

Is because “Public  
Supply” pumping  
Draws water from  
everywhere else

Figure C3: Change in Upper Floridan aquifer from 2035 withdrawals within the NFSEG domain.



SRWMD  
and  
SJRWMD  
want to fix:  
  
Lower  
levels and  
flows

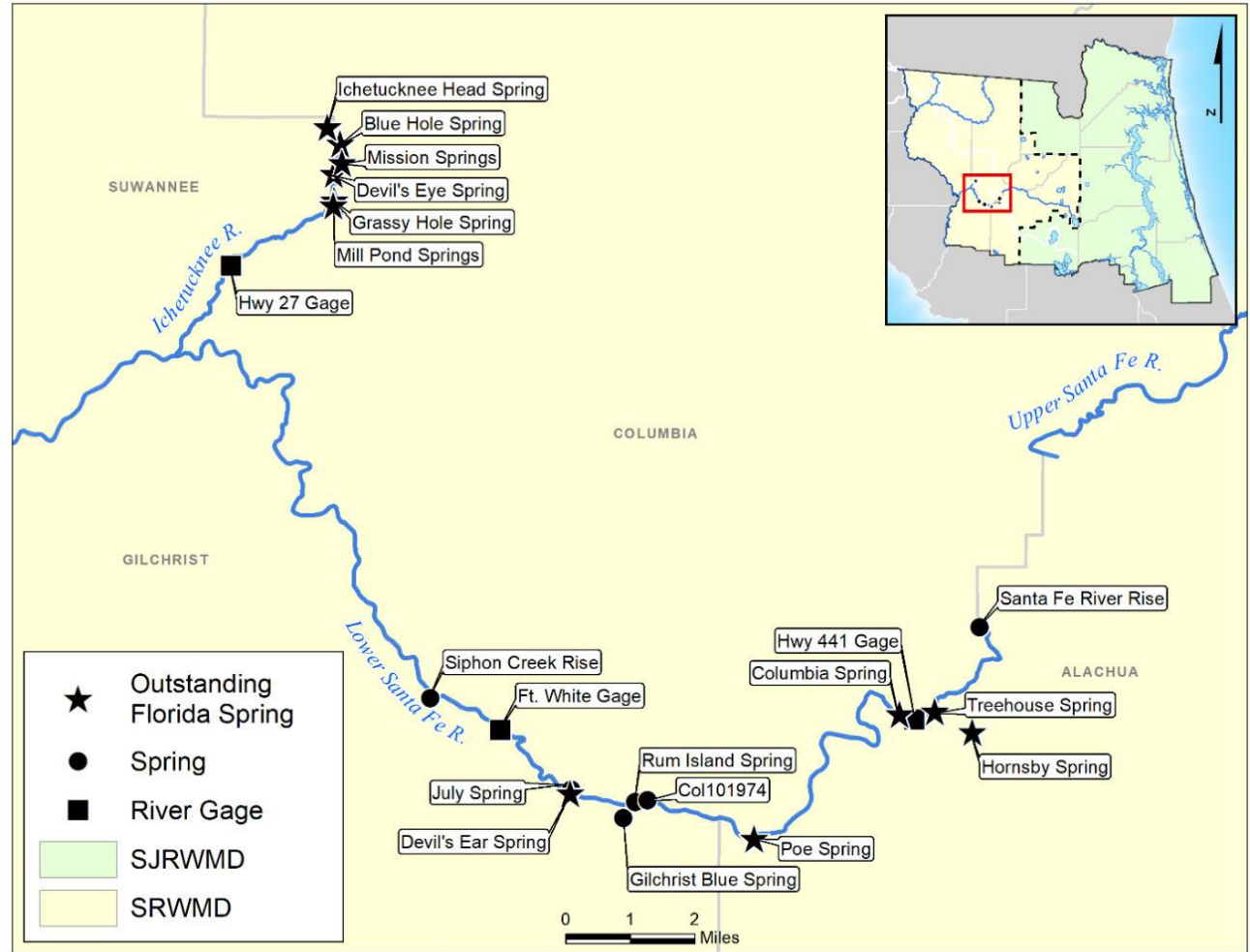


Figure 1. Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and Priority Springs

**Agriculture  
uses most  
SRWMD  
water**

**But Public  
Supply  
uses most  
SJRWMD  
water**

*Table 5. Percent of 14-18AVG withdrawal impacts by water use type and compliance gage for the SRWMD portion of the Partnership area*

Water Use Type	Lower Santa Fe Fort White	Lower Santa Fe Hwy 441	Ichetucknee Hwy 27
Public Supply	6%	6%	6%
Domestic Self-Supply	5%	4%	6%
Agricultural	26%	20%	24%
Commercial/Industrial/Institutional & Mining/Dewatering	3%	3%	4%
Landscape/Recreation	1%	1%	2%
Power Generation	2%	3%	1%
Total	43%	37%	42%

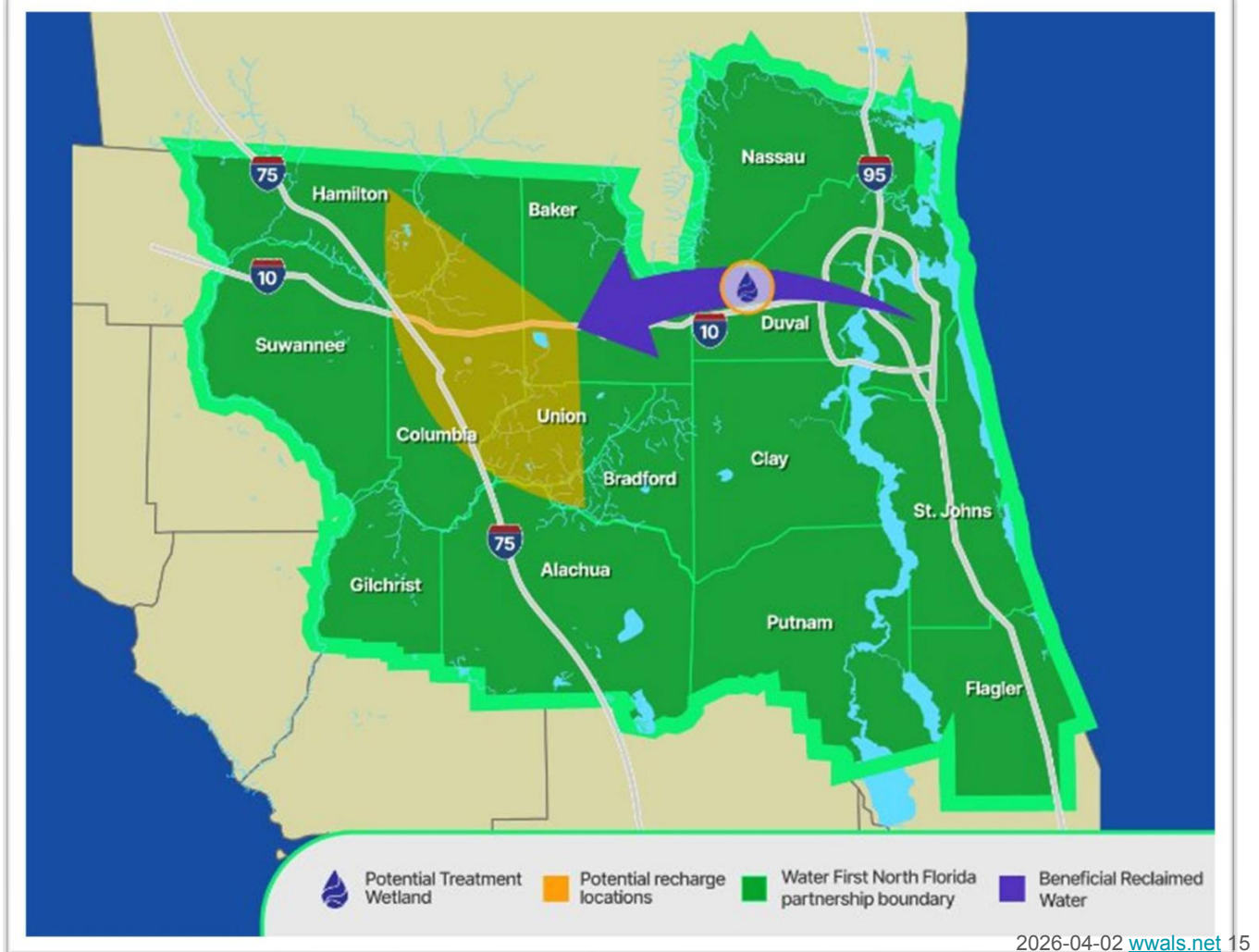
\*Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding

*Table 6. Percent of 14-18AVG withdrawal impacts by water use type and compliance gage for the SJRWMD portion of the Partnership area*

Water Use Type	Lower Santa Fe Fort White	Lower Santa Fe Hwy 441	Ichetucknee Hwy 27
Public Supply	28%	32%	23%
Domestic Self-Supply	4%	5%	4%
Agricultural	2%	2%	2%
Commercial/Industrial/Institutional & Mining/Dewatering	5%	6%	6%
Landscape/Recreation	<1%	<1%	<1%
Power Generation	1%	1%	1%
Other	<1%	<1%	<1%
Total	39%	45%	35%

\*Numbers may not add to 100% due to rounding

Why is this  
a solution?  
(Treated  
JAX  
wastewater  
piped into  
wetlands in  
the  
Suwannee  
Basin)





**AGENDA REQUEST FOR  
GOVERNING BOARD MEETING  
November 12, 2025**

**Account Name:** Water First North Florida

**Funding Source:** State Sources – DEP

**Budget Authority:** FY 2025–28 (anticipated)

**Budget:** \$2,170,000 (anticipated)

Why is  
**SJRWMD**  
hiring

to fix **SRWMD**  
levels & flows?

<b>Fiscal Year</b>	<b>Estimated Amount*</b>
FY 2025-26	\$800,000
FY 2026-27	\$900,000
FY 2027-28	\$470,000

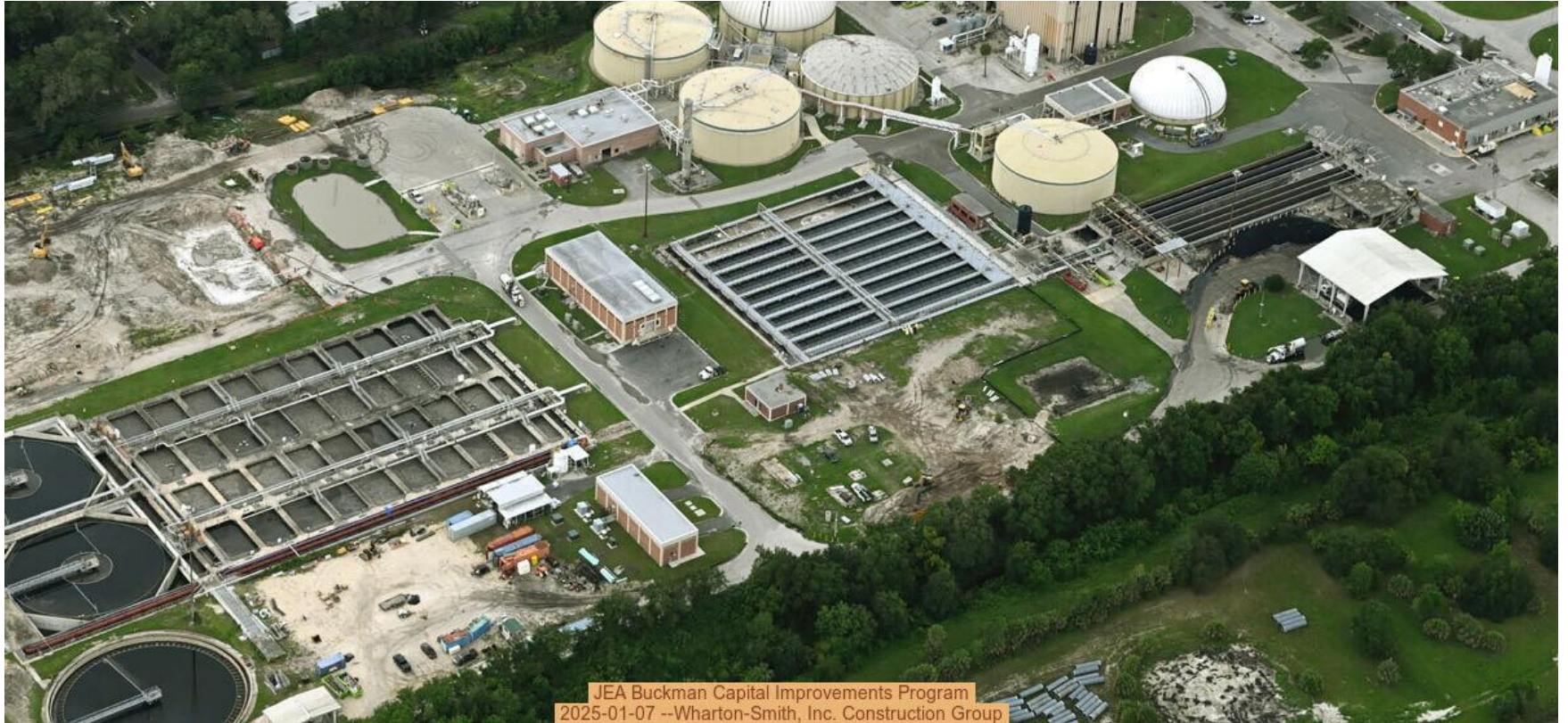


# Project Cost: **\$1 Billion**

## Who Pays?

- Which four NE Florida utilities?
  - How much from each?
  - How much will customer rates rise?
- How much from
  - SRWMD, SJRWMD, FDEP?
    - SJRWMD E.D. says \$125 million
  - How much will taxes rise?

# JEA approved \$400 million for WFNF 2025-11-19



JEA Buckman Capital Improvements Program  
2025-01-07 --Wharton-Smith, Inc. Construction Group

“According to JEA, minimum flows and water levels stipulate how much water can be drawn from certain sources to avoid environmental damage from groundwater pumping. Because the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers have not met those MFLs, **the region has created Water First as its solution.**”

–Marcela Camargo, new4jax.com, November 19, 2025

## **Who is this “the region”?**

- Floridians, do you remember voting for this project?
- Do you remember any candidate saying they were for this project?
- So who is this “the region” who created WFNF?

“JEA said the project will use high-quality reclaimed water **and further treat it through a wetland filtration system** before recharging it to the Floridan Aquifer.”

**Why should the Suwannee Basin provide wetlands for “further treatment” of Jacksonville wastewater?**

**What’s in it for JEA?**

[FL 2021 Senate Bill 64](#): into Florida Statutes 403.064 and 403.892 **eliminating nonbeneficial surface water discharge** within a specified timeframe: by 2032.

Then JEA can’t send treated wastewater into St. Johns River.

## FL SB 64

“providing for the applicability of specified **reclaimed water aquifer storage and recovery well** requirements” was JEA’s first choice.

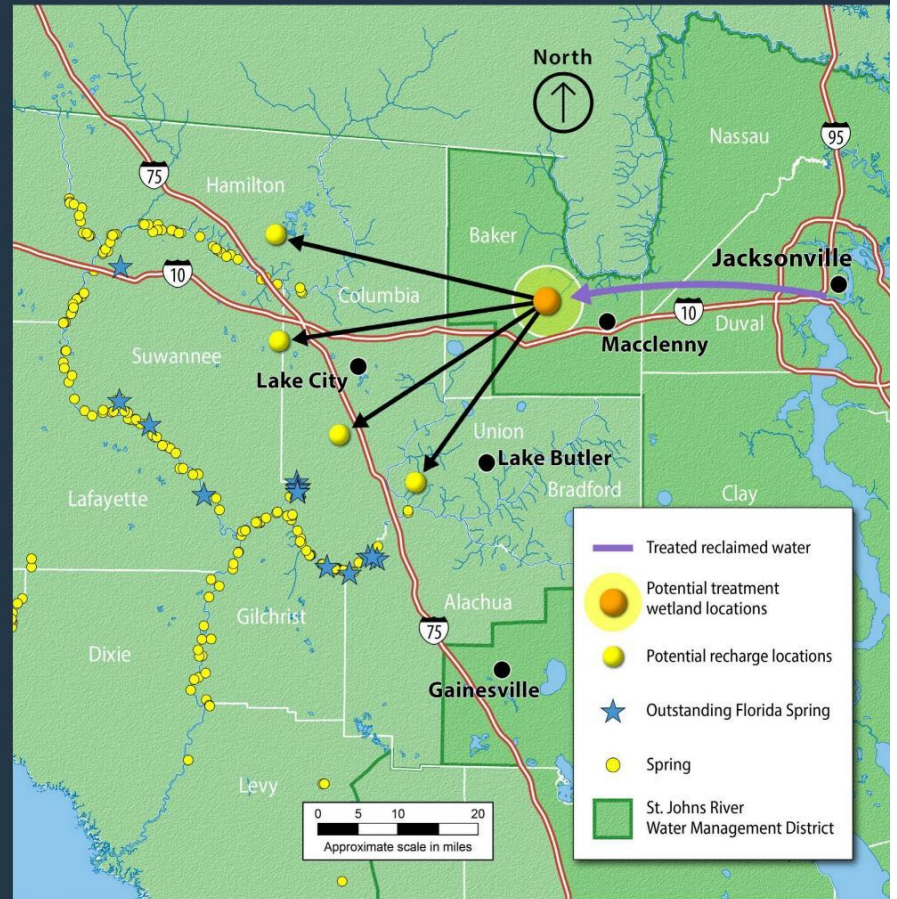
But: Florida Statutes 403.064 Section 17 (a)1.e. “The discharge provides **direct ecological** or public water supply benefits, such as **rehydrating wetlands** or implementing the requirements of **minimum flows and minimum water levels** or **recovery or prevention strategies for a waterbody.**”

# WATER FIRST NORTH FLORIDA

40-mgd project utilizing treated reclaimed water from JEA Buckman-Southwest WRFs for aquifer recharge in the North Florida region

## Project Milestones

- Years 1 to 3**
  - Governance/Planning/Funding
  - Communication Plan
  - SJRWMD Wetland-Recharge Siting Investigation
  - JEA WRF to Wetland Routing Study
- Years 3 to 4**
  - Preliminary Design Report Development
- Years 4 to 7**
  - 30%, 60%, 100% Design and Permitting
- Years 4 to 12**
  - Construction
- Year 13**
  - Start up



- Route of this 60-mile-plus pipeline or pipelines?
  - Eminent domain?
  - Land values nearby?
- Risks to drinking water wells?
- Risks to agriculture?
- Risks to industry?
- Risks to recreation in springs and rivers?

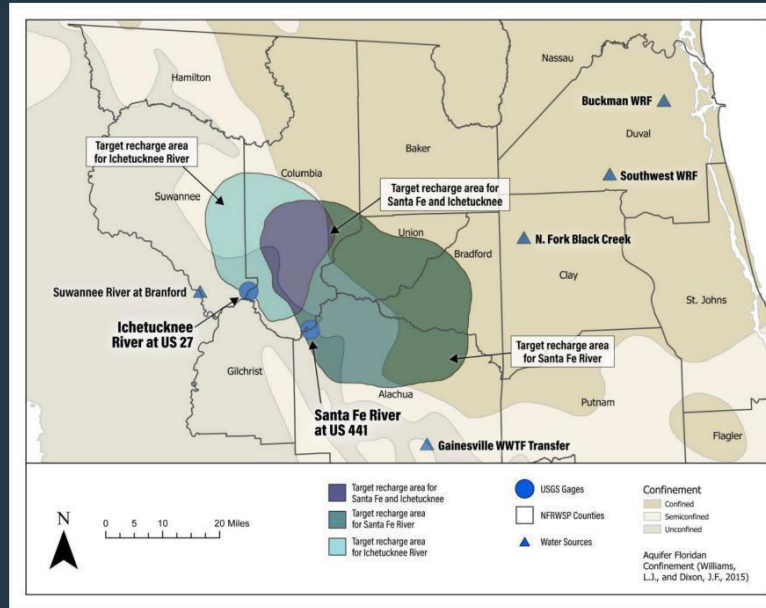
Tourism is Florida's biggest industry

# Water First North Florida- Next Steps

## PILOT STUDY



## SITING STUDY RFQ

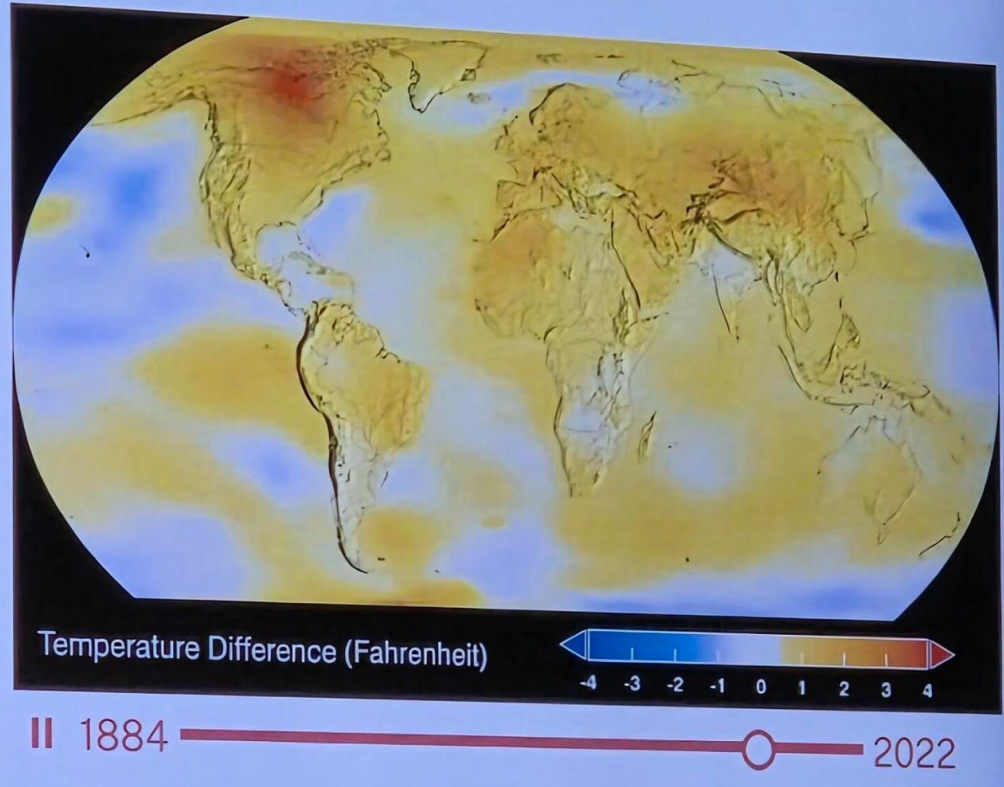


## WETLAND SITE ASSESSMENT



- Why is SRWMD a junior non-voting partner along with JEA, GRU, Clay Utilities, and St. Johns Co. Utilities?
- Where is the evidence that the source wastewater plant would remove PFAS forever chemicals, drugs, and artificial sweeteners?
- Why should we believe that JEA's Buckman wastewater plant will never fail and send untreated wastewater through the pipe,
  - despite being bigger than Valdosta's wastewater system, which has repeatedly failed?

The 10 Most  
Recent Years  
are the  
Warmest  
on Record!!



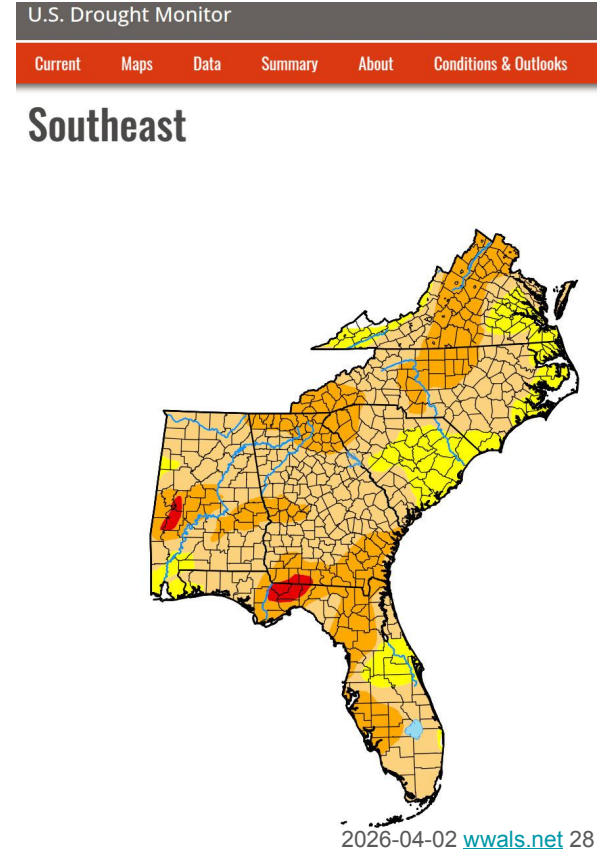
NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies (GISS), 2023.

Slide by UFL researchers presented at SRWMD Workshop 2025-12-09

# Solutions without massive infrastructure:

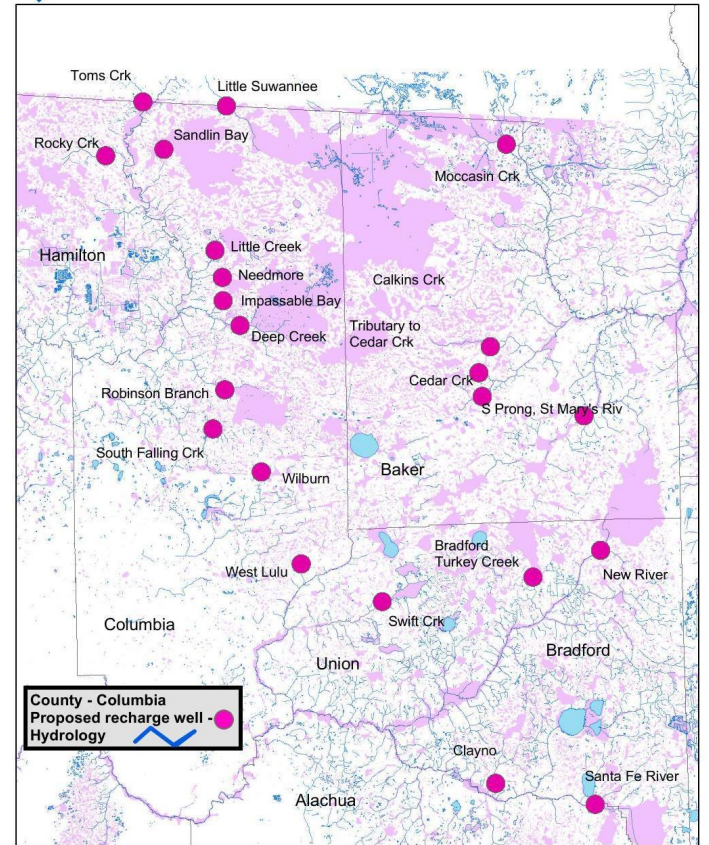
## Limiting withdrawals

- WMD permit standard conditions can require withdrawal limits, as in [Phase II, III, IV Water Shortage](#)
- In November 2025, a SRWMD Board member asked for preparation for dryer and hotter
- Eventually: limit permits issued



# Wells below forestry ditches: Why not considered?

- Dennis J. Price, P.G. proposed in 2016
- They're at overflow of wetlands below such ditches
- Similar to WFNF wetlands
- How can treated wastewater be cleaner than rainwater?



UPPER FLORIDAN  
RECHARGE PROJECT

0 13,500 54,000  
Feet

Flatwoods recharge wells with names of basins or creeks,  
located upstream of stream entrenchment, at discharge  
from larger basin, upstream of, but on, roads

1:473,689

2026-04-02 [wwals.net](http://wwals.net) 29

If Jacksonville's wastewater is treated so well it can be piped into the Suwannee River Basin,

- How about instead pipe that water into Jacksonville's drinking water?
- If people don't want to drink it, how about use it for golf courses, datacenters, and other industrial uses in their own basin?

# Desalination

SRWMD Board member for Upper Suwannee River Basin Larry Sessions: 2025-07-05:

- the water need is mostly on the coast
- and desalination is cheaper,
- at least to flush toilets and wash cars.

**Reduce JAX water use: eliminate effects on Suwannee Basin**

Usual objection: desalination is expensive

- Why can Texas, Arizona, and California do it?
- For drinking water, not just grey water?
- **If they can, why not Florida?**

# Desalination plants elsewhere

TX: [Harbor Island Seawater Desalination Facility](#); 2025; “up to 100 million gallons of drinking water per day for use by residents on the Gulf coast of Texas.”

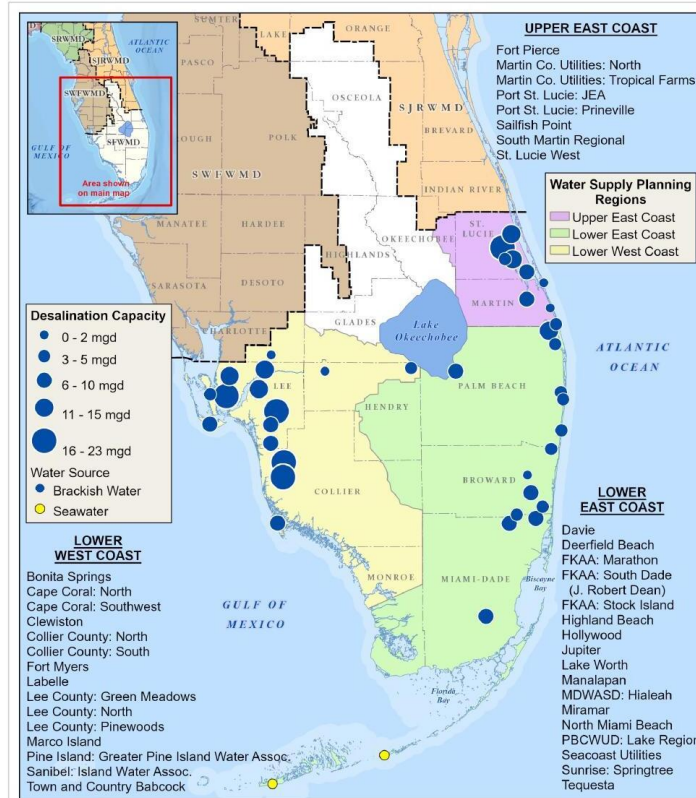
AZ: [Arizona water board approves desalination plants in California, Mexico](#); “trading that new water for Colorado River allocations currently used by those states or Mexico.” ? mgd

CA: These are just examples.

- [Doheny Ocean Desalination Project](#); “This new, locally managed water supply will **fortify our resilience against future droughts and adapt to the challenges posed by a changing climate and emergencies.**” 2025; 15 mgd
- [Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant \(NPP\) desalination plant](#); since 2015; 1.5 mgd
- [Poseidon Resources Corp. Claude “Bud” Lewis desalination plant, Carlsbad, CA](#); since 2015; 50 mgd
- [City of Santa Barbara’s Charles E. Meyer desalination plant](#); restarted 2015; 6.7 mgd
- [Monterey Peninsula desalination plant](#); 2025; ? mgd
- Rejected: [Huntington Beach desalination plant](#); 2022

# Actually, Florida already desalinates

- Tampa Bay Seawater Desalination Plant; 2007; 25 mgd
- Kermit H. Lewin Stock Island Reverse Osmosis Facility (Key West); May 2025; 4 mgd
- SFWMD numerous facilities, 2023 total capacity 292 mgd



**2023**  
**Facilities Using Brackish Groundwater and Seawater in South Florida**

**Number of Facilities: 40**

**Total Capacity (MGD): 292**

# Desalination could **eliminate** Jacksonville's water withdrawals

- **WFNF:**

- Only 40 mgd
- More than a dozen years to build
- Exports JAX water withdrawal problem to Suwannee Basin
- In the form of treated wastewater
- **Huge engineering project prone to failures**

- **Desalination:**

- **Could be many distributed desalination plants**
- **Why not all 120 mgd for JEA Drinking Water Service Areas?**

## SRWMD and SJRWMD reasons for rejecting desalination

<https://wwals.net/?p=69648>

- *High capital and operation and maintenance cost, partly due to the treatment process itself, and partly due to the high cost of brine disposal,*
  - Desalination costs have dropped and should continue over the dozen-year timeframe of WFNF.
- *Managing brine disposal incurs significant technical and regulatory challenges,*
  - Numerous desalination plants around the world manage brine, including 41 in the [South Florida Water Management District \(SFWMD\)](#) that produce about 292 million gallons a day of drinking water. JEA says JAX uses 120 mgd.
  - Most of those 41 desalinate brackish water: like the St. Johns River.

## Continued: SRWMD and SJRWMD reasons for rejecting desalination

- *Replacement of all four participating utility groundwater pumping with desalinated seawater would not meet the full MFL requirements, and*
  - Table ES.2 on page 7 says about desalination that, “Full MFL goals could be met based on current modeling and careful selection/design of recharge sites and methods”.
- *Ocean desalination does not address the requirements of Senate Bill 64 to put reclaimed water to beneficial use.*
  - **SB 64 is JEA’s problem, not a problem of the Suwannee River Basin.**
  - It says treated wastewater can’t go into rivers starting 2032
  - With a loophole for what WFNF proposes to do.

## Example modern seawater desalination plants

Name	Where	mgd	Cost <sup>1</sup>	mgd/\$1B	% <sup>2</sup>	Years
NAQA'A	UAE	150	\$0.82	183	20%	5
Alkimos	WA	72.4	\$1.95	37	98%	5
Birkat Miriam	IL	72.4	\$0.44	165	22%	5
Sorek	IL	169	\$0.489	345.6	11%	4
Sorek B	IL	177	\$0.6	295	12%	4
WFNF	FL US	40	\$1.1	36.4	100%	13

<sup>1</sup> Cost in \$billion USD <sup>2</sup> % of WFNF cost /mgd More information: <https://wwals.net/?p=69861>

## **What about SB 64?** Where should JEA Buckman treated wastewater go?

Within the St. Johns River Water Management District:

- East of US 301, which follows Trail Ridge (TR) north to south,
- numerous lakes large and small seriously depleted for 30 years.
- Send that treated wastewater to those lakes.
- Much shorter pipelines.
- And Jacksonville wells can suck that water back up, not across TR.
- If it's good enough quality to send to the Suwannee Basin,
- it's good enough to send to wetlands in the St. Johns Basin.

Thanks to Ken Sulak for this idea, and for the following two maps.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69949>

# Goldhead Branch St Park

seriously depleted lakes May 2021

Legend



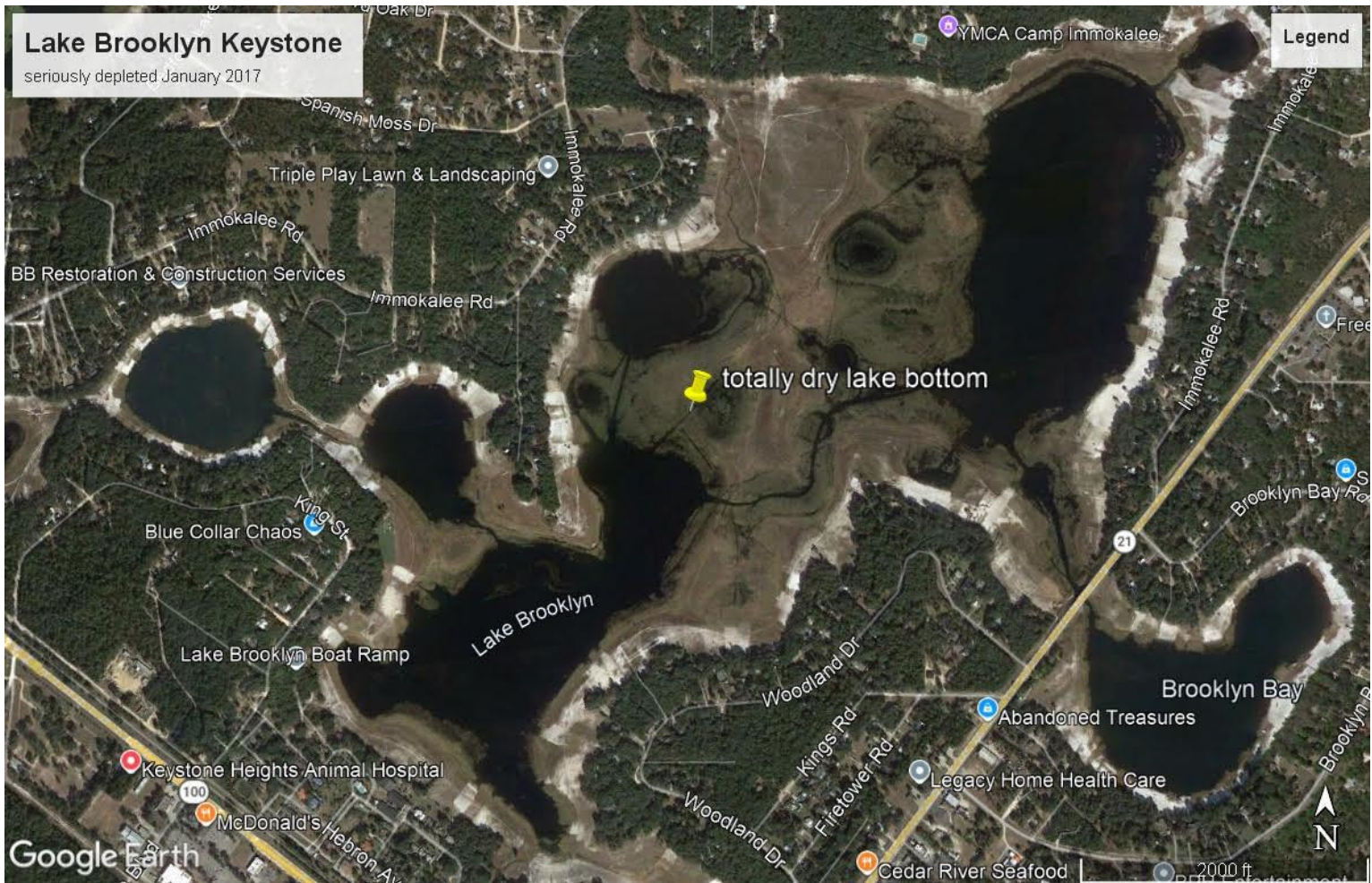
Google Earth

700 ft

# Lake Brooklyn Keystone

seriously depleted January 2017

Legend



<https://wwals.net/issues/wfnf>

See the above web page for:

- Who to ask
- [Why Not WFNF](#)
- [Upcoming meetings](#)
- [Government bodies against](#)
- [How to Comment](#)
- [Background](#)



# Ways to make public comments

- **Social media** does not count in the public record,
  - But can be good for getting people involved.
- **In person** gets the attention of a decision-maker.
  - May not leave a record unless you're at a recorded public meeting.
- **Telephone** is often the most effective
  - Each call is usually logged (at least for statehouse or Congress)
  - and is taken to represent many more people who did not call
- **Written comments** are best for anything complicated or detailed
  - Even if you telephone or speak, also send a written comment
- **Petitions** get attention, but individual comments even more so

# When you comment:

- be **polite**
- be **brief**
- be **specific**
- say **something different** from what everybody else said
- tie it to **your experience** and to evidence
- connect to the **larger picture**

All in a **memorable** way, of course.

**Don't worry** if you can't do all of the above.

**Do what you can.** Much better than doing nothing.

# Framing

Don't think of an elephant! Go ahead, try it.

Frame from your values, experience, and evidence, such as:

- The problem is too much water withdrawal
- The biggest withdrawer is the City of Jacksonville
  - Water bottlers use 1 mgd. JEA says JAX uses 120 mgd
- South Florida does desalination, why not JAX?
- How did such a big project happen without public input?
- How can it proceed without much more information?

# Examples of public comments:

Hailey Hall in Columbia County Observer about WFNF to the Columbia County Commission on February 21, 2026.

“What I heard in that video was not ‘this treatment plant can get the hormones out and get the PFAs out.’ I heard, ‘We’re researching it. We don’t know what it can even do yet.’ You don’t even know what you’re going to be putting into the ground.” —Hailey Hall, Suwannee County

[https://www.columbiacountyobserver.com/master\\_files/County\\_News\\_2026/20260221-water-first-north-fl-makes-columbia-county-appearance.html](https://www.columbiacountyobserver.com/master_files/County_News_2026/20260221-water-first-north-fl-makes-columbia-county-appearance.html)

WWALS written comments to that same Columbia County meeting.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69442>

## More from the Columbia County Commission meeting:

- "We were chosen because it's cheaper, easier, and shifts long-term risk from Jacksonville to us. They literally prioritized city growth over our health, our land, and our river systems." —Josie Gaskins, Columbia County
- "Jacksonville just spent 925 million for a football team... if Jacksonville will do a 50 or \$100 million [desalination] plant and let that aquifer fill itself back up, I think it'd be a better plan." — Robbie Hollingsworth, Columbia BOCC
- "They have renamed the treated wastewater as 'reclaimed water' in order to make it more acceptable to those who are not paying close attention." — Carol Eckhert, Suwannee County

## Still more from the Columbia County meeting:

- "Did you know that JEA is under consent order right now?... That means that they're polluting the St. Johns River every day." — Merrilee Malwitz Jipson, Columbia County
- "I have seen things like Occidental come in. I don't know where they were. When Occidental came in, they promised they would not take enough water out to ruin the springs and so forth. They did... I suggest tonight you call DeSantis, [and] your representative." — Dee Paddock, Suwannee County
- "We don't solve resource depletion by introducing new risks into the system. We solve it through responsible management, transparency, and protection of the resource itself." —Nathaniel Warner, Columbia County
- "The people have spoken. We don't want a big septic tank for Jacksonville's waste." —Kevin Parnell, Columbia BOCC

## Comments from a Live Oak meeting

Jessica Wilkinson, WUFT, February 19, 2026,

[Suwannee County residents unhappy with a \\$1 billion dollar water supply plan.](#)

- Area resident Ed Lee expressed his dissatisfaction with the plan approved by the Suwannee River Water Management District in November 2025 to address potable water issues. “Nobody has talked anything about money,” said Ed Lee. “Today you’re talking \$1 billion. What the hell do you think it’s gonna cost with the time it gets there? It’ll be \$15 billion.”
- Suwannee Riverkeeper John S. Quarterman, “The entire area JEA serves uses 120 million gallons. Remember that Texas plant, one plant does 100 million gallons. There’s no reason it has to be all in one place,” said Quarterman. “It doesn’t have to take more than a dozen years to come online.”

## More examples:

Dennis J. Price, P.G.'s op-ed in the Lake City Reporter, February 19, 2026.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69519>

Video of the February 2nd WWALS Webinar on WFNF, with appearances by Hailey Hall, Rick Lanese, Joe Squitieri, and others, after a presentation by Suwannee Riverkeeper John S. Quarterman.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69378>

A reference, How to Write Effective Public Comments, by the Environmental Data & Governance Initiative, Gehrke, G., & Paz, A. (2024).

<https://envirodatagov.org/how-to-write-effective-public-comments/>

# Ask for explanations or to stop the project:



- Members of Congress & Statehouse
  - [http://openstates.org/find\\_your\\_legislator/](http://openstates.org/find_your_legislator/)
- SRWMD and SJRWMD Board
  - <https://www.mysuwanneeriver.com/134/Current-Board-Members>
  - <https://www.sjrwmd.com/about/organization/directors/>
- County Commissioners and City Councils
  - <https://www.fl-counties.com/2025-fac-directory/>
- Florida Counties Task Force about wastewater
  - <https://wwals.net/?p=68081>

# Government bodies against WFNF: *so far*

## Regional entities against WFNF

- 2026-03-18 [Dozen Florida Counties Task Force Resolution against WFNF and for Desalination](#)
- 2026-03-26 [North Central Florida Regional Planning Council](#) Resolution against WFNF and for Desalination

## Local governments against WFNF

- 2026-02-27: [Madison County BOCC](#).
- 2026-03-05: [Columbia County BOCC](#).
- 2026-03-07: [Town of Branford](#) called for a moratorium.
- 2026-03-17: [Suwannee County BOCC](#) *“Once the spigot is turned on, it is impossible to predict the consequences which will impact literally every person in the area. Our citizens should not suffer the consequences of such hubris.”*
- 2026-03-24: [Hamilton County BOCC against the utter disrespect of SRWMD and JEA about WFNF](#).
- 2026-03-25: [Madison County calls for a moratorium on WFNF](#).

<https://wwals.net/issues/wfnf/#govbod>

# Contact:

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