

Introduction

The strategy for recovering and maintaining the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and priority springs (LSFIR) minimum flows and minimum water levels (MFLs) includes two components: the project component and a regulatory component. See, Rule 62-42.100(2), Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.). This document, the 2025 Implementation Strategy (Strategy) for the LSFIR MFLs, is the project component of the overall strategy, and its purpose is to identify projects and measures for recovering and maintaining river and spring flows in the Lower Santa Fe River Basin to meet the MFLs. This Strategy will become effective upon approval by the governing boards of the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) and the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) (collectively, the Districts) and upon the effective date of Rule 62-42.300, F.A.C. In accordance with Subsection 373.042(5), Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is adopting the MFLs and regulatory component of the overall strategy to facilitate their application by both Districts without the need for further rulemaking.

The Florida Water Resources Act of 1972 requires the Districts or DEP to establish MFLs to prevent significant harm to waterbodies from withdrawals. According to Section 373.042, F.S., MFLs are defined as “the limit at which further withdrawals would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area.” Once established, these MFLs guide water management and permit decisions to ensure sustainable water use. If the waterbody falls below or is projected to fall below within 20 years the adopted MFL, Subsection 373.0421(2), F.S., requires the development of a recovery or prevention strategy to recover the waterbody or prevent a waterbody from falling below the MFL. The strategy must include measures to either restore the flow or level to the MFL or prevent it from declining below the MFL, incorporating additional water supplies, conservation efforts, and efficiency measures to achieve the MFLs while meeting current and future demands.

In 2016, the Legislature passed the Springs and Aquifer Protection Act, which provided additional requirements (see details below) for recovery or prevention strategies for MFLs associated with Outstanding Florida Springs (OFS) (Section 373.805(4), F.S.). The LSFIR MFLs include five OFS on the Santa Fe River as well as the OFS Springs Group on the Ichetucknee River (Figure 1). Additionally, Subsections 373.0421(2) and 373.805(1), F.S., state that at the time of MFL adoption, a prevention or recovery strategy must be adopted concurrently if the springs are below, or are projected to fall below, an adopted MFL within a 20-year planning horizon.