



FLORIDA SPRINGS COUNCIL

The Honorable Ron DeSantis
Governor of Florida
Plaza Level 05,
The Capitol
400 S Monroe St
Tallahassee, FL 32399

September 23, 2019

Dear Governor DeSantis,

I am writing you today as the President of the Florida Springs Council, a coalition of 53 organizations working to ensure the protection and restoration of Florida's springs, the rivers they have created and our aquifers. I am a lifelong conservative Republican, who after serving this country as an Army helicopter pilot (OH-6/UH1/AH1G) for 2-1/2 years during the Vietnam War, returned to Florida and made a living as a corporate pilot, commercial fisherman, and a FAA air traffic controller. My earliest memory in life is the view through the glass bottom of a tour boat at Silver Springs in 1951. My life in Florida has been totally immersed in outdoor recreation and employment related to our waters, to include sport and commercial fishing/diving, surfing, and sailing. It is not a unique construct within my generation.

To conserve means to protect those things we value most: our health, our economy, our security, and our natural resources. In Florida, this means protecting our waters. Without clean and plentiful water all of these things we value are put at great risk. I find it somewhat ironic that public perception has it that the Left argues for protection of the natural environment and the Right is the cult of destruction. In the extreme neither is true, but with that said, the root word of "conservative" is conserve. It is a fundamental platform that should be embraced with great vigor, for here in Florida it is the foundation of our economy and a potential bridge across the chasm of political divide.

I have witnessed firsthand the immense degradation of waters across Florida, but nowhere has the decline been more significant or heartbreaking than in the springs and rivers of central and north Florida. Some springs have been lost forever, others are full of algae and unfit for people or wildlife.

These springs were not only environmental treasures, they were important social, recreational, and economic attractions for rural communities spawning and supporting many local businesses. They are also a window into the Floridan Aquifer which is the source of drinking water for nearly two-thirds of Florida. What we see through that window gives us great concern.

Of the thirty Outstanding Florida Springs recently assessed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection twenty-four were found to be impaired by excessive nutrients, some nearly ten times the water quality standards adopted by the U.S. EPA. In some areas, private drinking water wells have been shown to have nitrogen levels above the standard for human health, putting families at increased risk of illness and cancer. The future growth and vitality of

PO Box 268
High Springs, FL 32655

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these areas will be determined by how we address the water quality and quantity issues in our state.

Currently, we are failing. After a four-decade delay in creating water quality restoration plans for Florida's most important springs, the Department of Environmental Protection recently published plans that by their own admission fall far short of achieving water quality goals.

In rural areas like the Suwannee River Basin, which includes seven impaired Outstanding Florida Springs (the most of any basin), the intensity and growth of agricultural nutrient pollution will likely result in these springs becoming more polluted over the duration of the plan. In more urban areas, like Wekiwa Springs in Orange County or Volusia Blue Springs, the plans are based on the ability of the state to upgrade or connect more than one hundred thousand septic tanks over the next twenty years and upon questionable assumptions about the benefits these projects will achieve. They were also developed in a landscape of inter-departmental conflict between state agencies which is wholly unacceptable.

As a result, seven Florida Springs Council member organizations, along with three individuals, have been forced to take legal action against the Florida Department of Environmental Protection just to demand plans that meet the minimum requirements under state law to restore water quality. The irony is not lost on me that these groups must dedicate their very limited time and money to fighting state agencies, rather than educating the public. If you live on the Rainbow or Santa Fe River and are faced with springs restoration plans that show no hope for restoration, what choice do you have?

On the contrary, I, and many of my colleagues, have great hope for your administration, particularly after the strong actions you took on Everglades funding and the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board. However, it appears as though your administration has left the springs, rivers, and voters of north and central Florida behind. Although we applaud and appreciate your efforts on behalf of the Everglades, we believe that the waters of central and north Florida are worth protecting, too.

We patiently await your installation of a balanced perspective to the governing boards of the four water management districts responsible for protection of our springs. There are a dozen qualified applicants who are supported by the environmental community and not influenced by vested business or political interest. It is our considered opinion that one or two representatives of the environmental community on each Governing Board is not too much to ask and would go far to defuse existing hostility toward those boards.

The Florida Springs Council supports funding for Everglades restoration and projects to reduce pollution on the southeast and southwest coasts. We strongly believe that in the third most populated state in the union, which was blessed with unmatched water resources and a \$91 billion annual budget, the Legislature can find the funds to protect the Everglades, our coasts, and the springs, rivers, and lakes of central and north Florida. We have also suggested and endorsed raising additional revenue for water restoration projects by charging a small fee on large consumptive water users and increasing water management district ad valorem tax rates. Through a combination of existing, underutilized, and new funding sources, Florida should be able to meet the state's water funding needs which are clearly well in excess of a billion dollars per year.



It is essential that Florida's taxpayers know that their money is being spent to the benefit of all Floridians and in the most effective way possible. This is especially important for areas of great significance to the state where limited funds are available. Both conditions clearly apply to Florida's water resources.

We make decisions here in Florida based on practical reality. For example, we must account for sea level rise when we make decisions about growth and infrastructure, and we must do so when it comes to environmental restoration efforts. In both cases it is a matter of following the science and exercising fiscal responsibility. We must ensure that our tax dollars are spent in the best long-term interests of our state.

Effective environmental legacies must bridge the divide found in politics. No one remembers the specific appropriations or projects funded during a particular administration. They only care about clean plentiful water, preserved natural lands, and abundant and diverse wildlife. They do not accept that what they did casually in younger years is not possible today.

Florida's waters are nearly all polluted and becoming more so. We are in, or on the verge of, a water supply crisis in many areas of our state that are still trying to grow. We are losing acreage daily to development, without corresponding effort to offset the impacts. Local governments are being impeded from trying to take actions to protect our rivers and coasts. The average Floridian has never had less power to influence environmental and growth decisions from the local to state level than today. I implore you to not let this be your environmental legacy.

I end with five requests, which I believe are both conservative and in the best interest of our state. First, do what is necessary to protect our health, economy, and natural resources by recommending an environmental budget that restores and protects all of Florida's waters. Second, seek out innovative, equitable, and efficient means of increasing revenue for water restoration projects to meet Florida's water quality and supply needs. Third, ensure that state funding decisions are based on the best available science and the impact they will have on Florida's people and environment. Fourth, instruct the Department of Environmental Protection to agree to adopt springs restoration plans which achieve water quality goals, allocate pollution load reductions, and make agricultural best management practices functional. Fifth, restore diversity and balance to all of Florida's water management districts.

Sincerely,

Dan Hilliard,
President Florida Springs Council