Item. 9.d.
News Articles

Environment and Natural Resources >

Draft springs legislation would reserve spring flows, require septic tank hook-ups

Bruce Ritchie, 10/25/2013 - 04:05 PM The Florida Current
responses

Draft springs protection legislation being prepared by **Sen. David Simmons** would designate 21 "outstanding Florida springs" and require the establishment of springs protection zones around them.

The draft legislation also would direct the **Florida Department of Environmental Protection** and the water management districts to restore flow to those designated springs.

Water management districts would be required to establish "protection zones" with restrictions on septic tanks and wastewater treatment plants.

Simmons said he expects to file a bill within 30 days after issuing another draft and receiving more comments from agencies and interest groups.

"I'm looking at a comprehensive methodology for saving and preserving our water resources," Simmons said.

Asked why he is presenting the bill this year, Simmons, R-Altamonte Springs, said, "Because it should have been done five years ago."

Scientists say Florida's springs are becoming choked with weeds and algae whose growth is fueled by increasing nitrogen seeping into groundwater. The nitrogen comes from a variety of sources including fertilizer, septic tanks, stormwater runoff, livestock manure and wastewater spray fields.

Some environmentalists say water management districts already have permitted too much water use in some areas around springs.

Springs legislation filed before the 2013 session by **Sen. Darren Soto** and **Rep. Linda Stewart**, both Democrats from the Orlando area, died without being heard in committees. The bills have been refiled this year as **SB 76** and **HB 49.**

The draft legislation by Simmons would seem to have a better chance of being heard because he is in the majority party and is working with a variety of agencies and interest groups. His draft legislation would require DEP and the water management districts to map by July 1, 2015 the "springshed" areas where groundwater flows to each of the 21 designated "outstanding" springs.

Each water management district would be required to reserve water to restore historic flows to those springs by July 1, 2016. No new water-use permit would be allowed that would reduce the flow reserved for a spring.

Where there is insufficient water to restore historic flows, districts would be required to implement recovery plans to restore flows within 10 years.

On water quality, cities and counties within the springsheds would have to require that landscape fertilizer include at least 50 percent slow-release nitrogen. The DEP would set maximum standards for cities and counties to implement.

Agricultural operations within springsheds would be required to use "best management practices" established by the **Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.**

Water management districts would be required to establish protection zones around springs where the Floridan Aquifer is vulnerable to contamination.

All wastewater treatment plants within those zones would be required to meet an advanced treatment standard of 3 milligrams per liter of total nitrogen.

Property owners with septic tanks on lots of less than 1 acre would be required to connect to a central wastewater treatment facility by July 1, 2015 at no cost to residential property owners.

Asked about the criteria for choosing which springs are designated as outstanding, Simmons said, the 21 springs in the legislation represented only an initial list.

"If there needs to be some other spring that's on it then somebody needs to come to me and say it should be on there," he said.

Water district to set minimum flows and levels for Silver Springs

By Bill Thompson
Staff writer
Published: Monday, October 21, 2013 at 5:27 p.m.

Decades after lawmakers decreed that state water managers must determine the potential point of no return for Florida's waterways, the state's biggest spring gets its turn.

The St. Johns River Water Management District Governing Board voted last week to launch the process of establishing minimum flows and levels, or MFLs, for Silver Springs and the Silver River, which flows from the springs.

The process is expected to be completed next year, and when finished, St. Johns' governors will have identified the threshold at which the springs and the river will suffer significant harm.

But some observers question whether the decision will offer any real protection to an already threatened icon.

MFLs help water managers decide when withdrawals in the watershed are excessive and need to be curtailed in order to the protect the waterway.

The process, district officials said, will also involve developing a strategy to help keep the waterway above its flow level, or enable it to rebound if it is already below that point.

Such steps could include a combination of heightening conservation efforts, finding alternative water supply sources and changing regulations.

"This marks the beginning of the rule-making process, but it is the culmination of years of scientific work by District staff," Hal Wilkening, the district's director of strategic deliverables, said in a statement.

Silver Springs and the river will be two of 16 waterways that the board will set MFLs for in 2014, St. Johns officials said.

The district's pursuit of MFLs for Silver Springs and the Silver River comes 41 years after the Legislature passed the landmark water-management law directing that those levels be set for all of Florida's surface waters, including springs.

Silver Springs also gets its review 21 years after St. Johns made its first MFL designations.

According to district staff, 123 waterways across St. Johns' 18-county jurisdiction have gone through the MFL process since 1992.

That came about largely because of a lawsuit brought by a group in Putnam County who maintained, according to court records, that St. Johns had "ignored" the 1972 mandate, and as a result, local lakes and springs had dried up, or were close to doing so.

An appellate court sided with the group in a 1993 ruling, saying it was "undisputed" that the district had set MFLs for just two waterways in 20 years.

The district countered that the law allowed it to move at its own discretion — an argument the court rejected.

A settlement of that lawsuit led St. Johns to launch the MFL process for 46 lakes and springs between 1995 and 1999, a district report indicates.

And St. Johns begins the process for Silver Springs 17 years after Gov. Lawton Chiles issued an executive order directing water managers to develop the MFL priority list based on "the importance of the waters to the state or region, and the existence of, or potential for, significant harm."

At the time that order was issued, according to St. Johns' data, Silver Springs output was hovering near its historic norm, with fluctuations both well above and well below that mark in the ensuing years.

District officials first added Silver Springs to the priority list in 2001, with the process to be finished by 2004, according to a report St. Johns published last month.

That was delayed, however, and in 2003, when St. Johns released an update to its long-range water-supply

assessment study, Silver Springs and the Silver River were supposed to make the MFL priority list by 2006.

That, too, was delayed.

In the report released last month, district officials explained that Silver Springs and Silver River were "re-prioritized" several times so water managers and the U.S. Geological Survey could work together to clarify the discharge data for the river.

Silver Springs is actually a system of 30 separate springs and 69 vents.

The two agencies apparently were trying to reconcile data recorded at the springs historic measuring site — about three-quarters of a mile downstream from the springhead — and the mouth of the river some five miles away.

St. Johns also wanted to coordinate with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, or Swiftmud, on drawing up MFLs for Silver Springs and Rainbow Springs, which is under Swiftmud.

Developing MFLs is welcome news to many who worry about Silver Springs, whose output has been dropping in recent years, relative to its historic level.

In November 2012, St. Johns released a report that indicated Silver Springs' flow rate was on a clear downward trend.

For instance, the volume recorded in 2010 was less than 500 cubic feet per second in 2010, well below the historic average of 709 cubic feet per second, based on readings made annually since 1947.

Bob Knight, founder of the Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute in Gainesville, said MFLs will accomplish little in protecting the healthy flow of water at Silver Springs.

Knight pointed out that St. Johns attributes most of the reduced volume to a combination of less rainfall and a proliferation of aquatic plant growth that clogs the river's plumbing system and causes pooled surface water atop the springs from allowing the output to reach the surface.

Rather, Knight said in an email, the district is sidestepping evidence that shows the flow reduction is tied to groundwater pumping in the watershed.

"The district is desperately trying to deny the visible evidence that they have (issued) and continue to issue permits for groundwater pumping that are contributing to the significant impairment of Silver and other springs in north and central Florida."

Andy Kesselring, president of the Silver Springs Alliance, said his group is still trying to understand St. Johns' findings and its concepts for the springs.

At this point, he described his members — Knight is on the board of the alliance as well — as "happy" that St. Johns has taken this step, but also concerned that more protection might be needed.

The Ledger.com

Lower Aquifer Under Exploration

By Sara Drumm
LEDGER MEDIA GROUP
Published: Monday, October 21, 2013 at 12:18 a.m.

WINTER HAVEN | It may sound like a problem for the distant future, but officials are hurrying to find a new source of water before 2035.

By that time, it is projected that Central Florida will be pumping about the maximum amount permitted from the Upper Floridan Aquifer.

Even before that — around 2021 — some municipalities, especially along the U.S. 27 corridor, are projected to need more water than they are allowed to draw from the upper aquifer.

Officials with Polk County and the South and Southwest Florida water management districts say they hope to use a supplemental water source about which not much is known: the Lower Floridan Aquifer.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District, also known as Swiftmud, which covers most of Polk County, is moving forward with a project to test the quality and quantity of water in the lower aquifer, which is separated from the upper aquifer by a thick layer of clay or rocks.

To do that, the district plans to drill three exploratory wells into the Lower Floridan Aquifer. Currently, it is looking into sites in Winter Haven, Haines City and Frostproof.

"We've come to the point where we've really got to come up with some other solutions, some other sources for supply," said George Schlutermann, a senior hydrogeologist for Swiftmud, during a recent presentation to Frostproof's City Council.

"The reality is, these programs take a long time," he said.

COSTLY, BUT PROMISING

The county, in conjunction with the water district, already has drilled one exploratory well as part of its unrelated Southeast Wellfield project.

The project aims to eventually build enough wells to pump 30 million gallons per day and a pipeline to distribute the water around the county.

Gary Fries, utility division director for Polk County, said tests of the first exploratory well, which is south of Lake Weohyakapka near Lake Wales, were promising. It could pump 2 million gallons per day.

And while the water quality is worse than that of the Upper Floridan, the water could be treated by forcing it through a fine membrane.

"It's a lot more expensive than what we typically do. With the Upper Floridan Aquifer, we don't typically have to do any filtering or membrane treatment," Fries said. "But I think it's absolutely necessary long term."

As the population grows, the Central Florida Water Institute has projected that by 2035, 1.1 billion gallons per day will be pumped in Polk, Orange, Lake, Osceola and Seminole counties.

Current permits allow that level of pumping — but some areas already are being overpumped and only 800 million gallons per day are pumped now.

If all 1.1 billion gallons were pumped, it could cause "significant damage to the environment," Fries said.

Water conservation efforts are helpful but aren't seen as a long-term solution.

"The cheapest way of extending your water supply is through conservation," Fries said. "But there will be a time when you need additional water."

Fries said he thinks the data from the exploratory well points to the lower aquifer as a viable source of water.

LIMITED DATA

However, the lower aquifer's characteristics vary from area to area, and Swiftmud's Schlutermann said it is too early to know whether it can be useful in other parts of the county.

The water quality and the amount of water that can be pumped each day need to be determined. Officials also need to make sure that taking from the lower aquifer doesn't affect the water in the upper aquifer.

"There really is very sparse information," Schlutermann said. "These locations are going to help us understand what we have."

Swiftmud's proposition to the cities is this: Work together to find a drilling site and Swiftmud will fund the exploratory well.

If tests show it can be a useful source of water, the city will have the option to buy the well. If it is not productive, or if the city does not wish to purchase it, Swiftmud likely will maintain it as a monitoring well.

If the city does purchase the well, it could be used to provide water to the city's customers or the city could sell the well.

Schlutermann said the project, which has been in the planning stages for several years, will take about three years if the exploratory well tests give promising results.

He expects the exploratory phase to take a little more than a year.

If the district then decides to move forward with phase 2, additional monitoring wells and a production well from which water could be pumped will be built.

IN THE WORKS

In the meantime, Swiftmud is working with municipalities in East Polk to find three spread-out drilling sites. A potential site in Winter Haven already has been chosen.

Kim Hansell, utilities services director for Winter Haven, said she is excited about the project, but the city and the district still have to work out more details, such as a lease for the site, before making anything official.

If Winter Haven, Frostproof or Haines City officials decide they don't want a drilling site, the district will seek other locations.

Schlutermann said drilling is expected to begin next summer.

The Southeast Wellfield project is moving forward, as well.

The county is waiting to get a permit from the South Florida water district. If the permit is granted, there will be several more steps of preparation before construction of the wells would begin about 2019.

Fries said the project is estimated to cost $320 million, quite a bit more than the $4 million per well site that Swiftmud has budgeted, because the pipeline to transport the water around the county will be extensive and expen-sive.

Swiftmud has said it would help fund the county's project because it will extend into Swiftmud's territory. The district still is pursuing its own project because staff members have said they don't think the Southeast Wellfield would produce enough water to meet the increased demand of the future.

Both projects are fueled by the same worry, though.

"Without something like this, the water supply in Polk County could be in jeopardy," Fries said. "We all plan to grow, and we all plan to need more water."

[Sara Drumm can be reached at 863-401-6971 or sara.drumm@newschief.com. Follow her on Twitter at @saradrumm.]

Ocala Star Banner Ocala.com

Water district to set minimum flows and levels for Silver Springs

By Bill Thompson
Staff writer
Published: Monday, October 21, 2013 at 4:56 p.m.

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From: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>
To: WRWSA <richardowen@wrwsa.org>
Cc: Nancy Smith <nsmithnhs@aol.com>
Subject: Counties search for water...
Date: Mon, Oct 21, 2013 10:01 am

Counties Search for Water Solutions

By Tom Palmer
THE LEDGER
Published: Monday, October 21, 2013 at 12:29 a.m.

BARTOW | Officials in Polk and some surrounding counties are going to have to work together to find an additional 250 million gallons a day of fresh water to meet the next two decades' projected demand, but it's unclear what the sources will be, the County Commission was told Tuesday.

"We have to develop strategies that will not demand increased groundwater," said Mark Hammond, director of the Southwest Florida Water Management District's Resource Management Division.

Tentative information shows that the region, whose water consumption grew from 300 million gallons a day to 800 million gallons a day between 1960 and 2010, is at or near its capacity to tap the aquifer, he said.

Meanwhile, the projected water need is expected to grow to 1.1 billion gallons per day by 2035, Hammond said.

The work is part of something called the Central Florida Water Initiative, which involves efforts by major water users in Polk, Lake, Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties to come up with long-term water supply solutions.

In addition to local governments, the effort involves representatives from industrial, agricultural and environmental interest groups.

Hammond said the effort to pursue a more cooperative, regional approach to water-supply planning involves not only five counties, but also three water management districts.

In addition to Swiftmud, the South Florida and St. Johns River water management districts are involved.

The next steps will be discussion of a draft water supply plan at a public meeting Dec. 12 in Clermont and before the various water management districts' governing board meetings later that month.

Swiftmud's Governing Board will consider the draft plan Dec. 17, Hammond said.

The action by the water boards will trigger changes in local government growth plans that will require local officials to detail how they will meet future water needs, including listing specific projects they will pursue to accomplish those goals, he said.

Hammond said part of the efforts involves trying to standardize permitting and evaluation procedures among the three districts to create a more coherent, seamless water regulation system.

Following his presentation, County Commissioner Ed Smith asked what water officials in Central Florida have learned from Southern California, which taps water sources far from urban areas.

"Southern California is a hotbed for lessons," Hammond said, adding that Central Florida officials examined water- supply strategies used around the world in places such as Australia, too.

"They (Southern California) have practically drained the Colorado River," Smith said. "I hope we don't do that to the Kissimmee River or the St. Johns River."

Following the meeting, Hammond said there's still much to be done using technical teams of experts from all of the user groups to come up with ways to boost conservation.

He said the coordination has been challenging.
"It's like a man with three watches trying to tell time," he said, but said they've reached agreement on modeling for groundwater use and for setting minimum flows and levels, which is a state-mandated procedure to preserve flow in rivers and protect other water bodies from overexploitation.

Gary Fries, Polk's utilities director, has been involved in the technical discussions.

He said one of the challenges will be figuring out ways to store and retrieve reclaimed water, which now is used primarily for irrigation, but is unneeded during the rainy season.

"This is a move in the right direction, though," he said, explaining that looking regionally is critical.

Bloomberg

Water Desalination Capacity Climbs on Power, Energy Needs

Demand for water to generate power, energy and refining needs sparked such growth in desalination plants that 50 percent more capacity is due online this year than in 2012, according to newly published data.

A 30 percent improvement in energy efficiency of the best performing desalination plants contributed to the rise, said Christopher Gasson, publisher of Global Water Intelligence, which today released the DesalData report with the International Desalination Association.

"You could see this as the water–energy nexus in action," Gasson said in a statement. "The energy industry needs water, both in refining and power generation as well as upstream. The water industry also needs energy, and the two seem to be coming together in increased demand for desalination."

Desalination plants being commissioned this year alone can produce 6 million cubic meters a day -- as much fresh water as 28 months of rain in London, the report said. That raises the total capacity of the world's 17,277 commissioned desalination plants to 80.9 million cubic meters, it said.

Seawater is the largest source of water for desalination at 59 percent, brackish water is next at 22 percent, then river water 9 percent and wastewater at 5 percent, according to the data. Towns and cities use 61 percent of the desalinated water, industry is the next biggest user at 26 percent, with power stations third at 7 percent.

Saudi Arabia has the largest online capacity of seawater desalination for its energy and domestic needs at 9.2 million cubic meters a day. Next is the United Arab Emirates at 8.4 million cubic meters and Spain at 3.8 million, according to the data.

Cleaning Water

Water cleansed of salt and impurities is used from cooling power plants to oil exploration, where it helps separate oil from sand in a process called low-salinity flooding that boosts recovery from older wells as much as 30 percent, according to data presented online that accompanied today's statement.

More than two-thirds of desalination plants now use more efficient membrane and pumps to purify water, with the remainder employing conventional thermal systems that heat water to boiling and recover the salt-free steam, Oxford, U.K.-based GWI said.

Markets expected to see the fastest growth in desalination during the next five years, more than doubling capacity, are South Africa, Jordan, Mexico, Libya, Chile, India and China.

The report was released ahead of the 2013 IDA World Congress taking place Oct. 20 to Oct. 25 in Tianjin, China.

To contact the reporter on this story: Peter S. Green in New York at psgreen@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Nicholas Johnston at njohnston3@bloomberg.net

From: Diane Salz <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>
To: WRWSA <richardowen@wrwsa.org>
Cc: Nancy Smith <nsmithnhs@aol.com>
Subject: Fwd: SWFWMD will lose 36% of its budget...
Date: Fri, Oct 18, 2013 8:31 am

--------- Forwarded message ---------
From: **Diane Salz** <salz.govconsultant@gmail.com>
Date: Fri, Oct 18, 2013 at 8:30 AM
Subject: SWFWMD will lose 36% of its budget...
To: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>

By JEFF ROSLOW

Staff Writer

Last Modified: Jan 11, 2012 07:30AM

Property owners in Polk County will see their property tax bills drop about $16 next year due to $210 million sliced from the water management districts in the state.

In return for those cuts the Southwest Florida Water Management, which contains most of Polk County, there will be fewer water resource projects, less money for local governments for projects they may be working on, and the district will no longer be able to buy conservation lands to protect.

Last week, Gov. Rick Scott signed a bill that cut the budgets for not only Southwest Florida Water Management District, also known as Swiftmud, but also for South Florida, St. John's, Suwanee River and Northwest Florida water management districts.

For Swiftmud, the cut will amount to 36 percent of its budget.

Robyn Felix, media relations manager for Swiftmud, said that will mean the budget will drop from $280 million to $161 million. That new budget will take effect on Oct. 1. The cuts could also mean a loss of jobs in the agency but whether that will happen is not known.

Scott acknowledged the likely job losses, but said they were a means to stirring private-sector growth.

"Most people believe government is larger than it should be," he said.

Specifically what these cuts mean to the average person is in the Cooperative Funding Program. In this program, each town can apply for money from the water management district for programs to help them save money on a toilet rebate program or on a flood protection project or to fix stormwater runoff into a lake, Felix said.

"Towns will still be able to apply for money but there won't be as much money to go around," Felix said.

She also said that Swiftmud is changing its focus from trying to save land in conservation buys. There is not any land in Polk County it will stop trying to buy, but in Pasco County, for instance, the agency will no longer try to buy land near the Starkey Preserve. The price tag was about $8 million.

"That's also been the direction of the Environmental Protection Agency; purchasing for conservation is no longer part of our core mission," she said.

Scott signed the bill as he stood before a large banner proclaiming "Promises Made, Promises Kept" and said the law would help fulfill his campaign mantras of stimulating the economy and job growth.

"The most important step we can take to create jobs in our state is to lower taxes," he said.

The new law requires the Legislature to annually review the budget and tax rate for each of the state's five water management districts and sets caps on the rate. Scott said, in effect, "the public will have a lot better handle on how their money is spent" and it holds the districts accountable.

Kirk Fordham, head of the Everglades Foundation, said the savings to homeowners would be insignificant and said Scott's appearance was especially insulting given a severe drought that has hit the state.

"Since the water management district's mission is to protect our natural resources and water supply, I'm not certain that gutting the agency in the midst of a massive water crisis is either smart politics or very good policy," he said.

But with the reality of less money this will give the agencies a reason to focus on cutting.

From: Diane Salz <disalz@yahoo.com>
To: Richard Owen <richardowen@wrwsa.org>
Cc: Nancy Smith <nsmithnhs@aol.com>
Subject: Fwd: St. Johns River Water Management District Water News
Date: Tue, Oct 15, 2013 2:19 pm

Sent from my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

From: Water News <waternews@sjrwmd.com>
Date: October 15, 2013 at 2:02:52 PM EDT
To: <disalz@yahoo.com>
Subject: St. Johns River Water Management District Water News

Email not displaying correctly? Click to view online.

St. Johns River Water Management District
Water News
News, meetings and notices

October 15, 2013

Process under way to set minimum flows and levels for Silver Springs and Silver River

The St. Johns River Water Management District Governing Board has voted to begin the process to set minimum flows and levels (MFLs) for Silver Springs and Silver River in Marion County to help prevent significant harm to those important water resources.

Establishing MFLs is an important step in continuing to plan for adequate water supplies in the region while also protecting water resources. During the consumptive use permitting regulatory process, MFLs are used as a basis for ensuring the protection of water resources in the area where withdrawals are being made.

"This marks the beginning of the rulemaking process but it is the culmination of years of scientific work by District staff," said Hal Wilkening, director of strategic deliverables. "Nothing is etched in stone yet, and there will be multiple opportunities for public comment."

In addition to setting MFLs for the two Marion County water bodies, prevention strategies are anticipated to be needed for each of the MFLs. If it is determined during the rulemaking process that MFLs are currently not being met, then recovery strategies will be needed.

Prevention and recovery strategies are measures that are undertaken to ensure MFLs will not go below their minimum levels (prevention) or will recover to their required levels (recovery). These measures include water conservation, alternative water supply projects, and regulatory changes that

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Upcoming meetings
For a listing of upcoming meeting dates, times and locations, visit:

- Governing Board meetings and agendas
- Other District meetings and notices

Contacts
District staff contacts for:

- Local governments
- Public and media

How to contact your local government

About us
The St. Johns River Water Management District is a regional agency of the state of Florida whose mission is to protect and ensure the sustainable use of water resources. The District is responsible for managing groundwater and surface water resources in all or part of 18

when combined, will protect the water resources of the area.

Silver River will be the seventh river and Silver Springs the tenth spring in the District to have MFLs established since 1992. During that time, the District has set 123 MFLs. The District plans to establish MFLs on a total of 16 water bodies in 2014.

Workshops will be held in 2014 to obtain public input. The public will also have opportunities to provide input throughout the process and when the Governing Board considers adopting the MFLs.

counties in northeast and east-central Florida.

floridaswater.com

WATER SUPPLY

Projects to Test Water in Lower Aquifer

Swiftmud plans to drill three wells around Polk

By Sara Drumm
News Chief
Published: Monday, October 14, 2013 at 2:25 p.m.

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Even before that — around 2021 — some municipalities, especially along the U.S. 27 corridor, are projected to need more water than they are allowed to draw from the upper aquifer.

Officials with Polk County and the South and Southwest Florida Water Management districts say they hope to use a supplemental water source about which not much is known: the Lower Floridan Aquifer.

The Southwest Florida Water Management District, also known as Swiftmud, which covers most of Polk County, is moving forward with a project to test the quality and quantity of water in the lower aquifer, which is separated from the upper aquifer by a thick layer of clay or rocks.

To do that, the district plans to drill three exploratory wells into the Lower Floridan Aquifer. Right now, it is looking into sites in Winter Haven, Haines City and Frostproof.

"We've come to the point where we've really got to come up with some other solutions, some other sources for supply," said George Schlutermann, a senior hydrogeologist for Swiftmud, during a recent presentation to Frostproof's City Council.

"The reality is, these programs take a long time," he said.

COSTLY, BUT PROMISING

The county, in conjunction with the water district, already has drilled one exploratory well as part of its unrelated Southeast Wellfield project.

The project aims to eventually build enough wells to pump 30 million gallons per day and a pipeline to distribute the water around the county.

Gary Fries, utility division director for Polk County, said tests of the first exploratory well, which is south of Lake Weohyakapka near Lake Wales, were promising. It could pump 2 million

gallons per day.

And while the water quality is worse than the Upper Floridan, the water could be treated by forcing it through a fine membrane.

"It's a lot more expensive than what we typically do. With the Upper Floridan Aquifer we don't typically have to do any filtering or membrane treatment," Fries said. "But I think it's absolutely necessary long term."

As the population grows, the Central Florida Water Institute has projected that by 2035, 1.1 billion gallons per day will be pumped in Polk, Orange, Lake, Osceola and Seminole counties.

Current permits allow that level of pumping — but some areas are already being overpumped and only 800 million gallons per day are pumped now.

If all 1.1 billion gallons were pumped, it could cause "significant damage to the environment," Fries said.

Water conservation efforts are helpful but aren't seen as a long-term solution.

"The cheapest way of extending your water supply is through conservation," Fries said. "But there will be a time when you need additional water."

Fries said he thinks the data from the exploratory well points to the lower aquifer as a viable source of water.

LIMITED DATA

However, the lower aquifer's characteristics vary from area to area, and Swiftmud's Schlutermann said it is too early to know whether it can be useful in other parts of the county.

The amount of water that can be pumped each day and the water quality need to be determined. Officials also need to make sure that taking from the lower aquifer doesn't affect the water in the upper aquifer.

"There really is very sparse information," Schlutermann said. "These locations are going to help us understand what we have."

Swiftmud's proposition to the cities is this: Work together to find a drilling site and Swiftmud will fund the exploratory well.

If tests show it can be a useful source of water, the city will have the option to buy the well. If it is not productive, or if the city does not wish to purchase it, Swiftmud will likely maintain it as a monitoring well.

If the city does purchase the well, it could be used to provide water to the city's customers or the city could sell the well.

Schlutermann said the project, which has been in the planning stages for several years, will take about three years if the exploratory well tests give promising results.

He expects the exploratory phase to take a little more than a year.

If the district then decides to move forward with phase two, additional monitoring wells and a production well from which water could be pumped will be built.

IN THE WORKS

In the meantime, Swiftmud is working with municipalities in East Polk to find three spread-out drilling sites. A potential site in Winter Haven already has been chosen.

Kim Hansell, utilities services director for Winter Haven, said she is excited about the project but the city and the district still have to work out more details, such as a lease for the site, before making anything official.

If Winter Haven, Frostproof or Haines City officials decide they don't want a drilling site, the district will seek other locations.

Schlutermann said drilling is expected to begin next summer.

The Southeast Wellfield project is moving forward, as well.

The county is waiting to get a permit from the South Florida water district. If the permit is granted, there will be several more steps of preparation before construction of the wells would begin around 2019.

Fries said the project is estimated to cost $320 million, quite a bit more than the $4 million per well site that Swiftmud has budgeted, because the pipeline to transport the water around the county will be extensive and expensive.

Swiftmud has said it would help fund the county's project because it will extend into Swiftmud's territory. The district is still pursuing its own project because staff members have said they don't think the Southeast Wellfield would produce enough water to meet the increased demand of the future.

Both projects are fueled by the same worry, though.

"Without something like this, the water supply in Polk County could be in jeopardy," Fries said. "We all plan to grow, and we all plan to need more water."

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