

THE MFL PROGRAM

AUTHORIZED DESTRUCTION OF THE SPRINGS AND RIVERS

By
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“It is not an unreasonable expectation based upon this state’s history that if an MFL for the Chassahowitzka will allow a reduction of 11% percent of its current flow, inevitably groundwater pumping will be permitted from the springsheds that will permanently reduce the river to that level. In other words, the District is setting the stage for groundwater withdrawals that will permanently lower the river’s flow to this level and the projected 15% reduction in habitat will no longer be scientific theory but permanent fact in perpetuity.” Sonny Vergara, Executive Director, SWFWMD 1997-2003.

Sonny Vergara was talking about the Chassahowitkza, but his statement is appropriate for all of the coastal springs and rivers. The Minimum Flows and Levels Program (MFL) is a legislative directive to the water management districts to define how much water can be taken from a water body before incurring significant harm to the water resources or the ecology of the area. SWFWMD has, arbitrarily, defined significant harm as a 15% destruction of species or habitat. Once viewed as protective of water resources, the MFL has evolved into setting consumptive objectives: 11% for the Chassahowitzka River, 5% for the Homosassa River and yet to be determined % for the Crystal and Withlacoochee Rivers. In Citrus County, planners and engineers have already defined where the first well fields will be for “regional distribution” of the Homosassa and Chassahowitzka waters. The MFL program can and will, if unchanged, lead to destruction of our unique, fragile, already impacted, coastal springs and rivers.

If you look at the big picture, the MLF program is in reality, a statewide project to create a map of water sources available for developments. Once in place it will be a litmus test. There will be no contesting the taking of water up to the MFL. For Citrus County the catch is that once wells are in place the sky is the limit. There is no way of measuring if the MFL is being exceeded on the coastal springs and rivers. You cannot put a specific level or flow on a tidal river. If you say the river cannot go below a certain level it assuredly will when the tides and winds push the waters out of the rivers. Especially during a drought. Therefore all regulatory controls will depend upon aquifer models which will be found inadequate.

Freshwater flow effects in a spring fed estuary environment are very complex. SWFWMD scientists did a good job when evaluating the Homosassa. It is not just a water level but rather the interaction of the fresh spring water and the gulf saltwater. A very sensitive, low salinity zone exists near the Homosassa Springs that is fundamental to the web of life. Reducing spring flow allows the water salinity to increase, eventually destroying this zone and the many species that depend on it. SWFWMD studies show the Homosassa to be very sensitive to the spring flow. If you cut the flow 1% you will lose 15% of the bass. Cut flow 2% will lose 15% of the blue crabs. Cut a little more and the bass and blue crabs are history.

In the Homosassa area barnacles are showing up on pilings near the springs. This has happened quickly and has come as a shock to local river observers. In the Chassahowitzka area essentially all of the hydric hardwoods near the river bank and the edge of the hammock have died for a distance of over a ¼ mile from the coastal hammock’s western edge. Aquatic vegetation has become seriously

degraded and is disappearing. Consistent with the water management studies, residents have concluded that this is the result of a rise in the river's salinity and reduced flows from the springs. In other words, the rivers are already in significant decline. Yet SWFWMD is proposing an MFL that will allow additional groundwater withdrawals which will further diminish the spring flows. Why would they want to do this?

To their credit SWFWMD is currently conducting a series of public workshops to search for new ideas to improve the current MFL program. And some interesting items have come forth.

One such item is the Outstanding Florida Waterways law that says: "Outstanding Florida Waters shall be worthy of special protection because of their natural attributes. Projects regulated by the Water Management District that are proposed within an OFW must not lower existing ambient water quality, which is defined as the water quality at the time of OFW designation." By 1993 all these coastal rivers were designated as Outstanding Florida Waterways. It is well documented that the flows of these rivers have already decreased substantially since 1993. So the MFL doesn't have to result in a 15% destruction of habitat and the decline of the springs since that time should be taken into account.

Another item is that the water management program has not incorporated information from the Impaired Waters program as defined by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. All of the coastal rivers are already in serious stress and are on the DEP Impaired Waters list.

An idea brought forth by the Withlacoochee Area Residents is to use the cross barge canal to impound fresh water for restoration and future water supply. This would provide a high volume of fresh water with little impact on the springs and rivers.

Finally, SWFWMD refuses to consider the hundreds of millions of dollars spent to establish the Coastal Springs Greenway, the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge, the state Wildlife Management Areas, the Crystal River Buffer Preserve, The Homosassa Springs Wildlife State Park or the St Martins Aquatic Preserves. All designed to protect these coastal resources.

There are choices to be made. Clearly SWFWMD can chose to bring some of these alternatives into the MFL program or they can chose to authorize the destruction of our coastal springs and rivers.