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John S. Quarterman: More testing needed to track river pollution

Fecal bacterial contamination from Georgia probably reached the Gulf of Mexico about March 3, 2020, according to the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD).

The good news: we know about that, because of much more water quality monitoring since I wrote here a year ago.

This Valentine's Day, Valdosta exceeded our request, testing not one but three times a week, all the way to the state line, and publishing the results online.

On February 28th, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) started putting results online from three Florida agencies, FDEP, SRWMD, and the Florida Department of Health (FDOH). WWALS Watershed Coalition publishes an online spreadsheet of those and WWALS' results: www.wwals.net/issues/testing/.

Valdosta's December 2019 spill of 7.5 million gallons of raw sewage into Sugar Creek provoked this recent testing. With no rain, the sewage sat there for a week, and then moved down the Withlacoochee River in about three weekly globs, at least once reaching the Suwannee.

Results show contamination episodes when no sewage spills have been reported, starting in the Withlacoochee River halfway to the state line, so it's not just Valdosta. They're probably coming down Okapilco Creek from Brooks County, Georgia, according to tests by WWALS and by Lowndes County, Georgia. There are other possibilities in Hamilton and Suwannee Counties, Florida. WWALS is narrowing down sources.

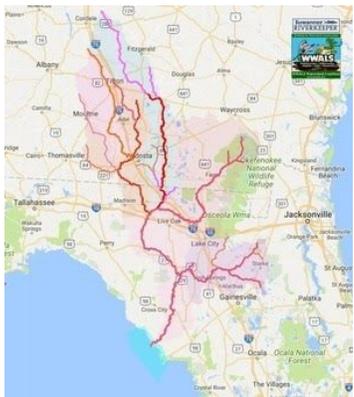
Without testing, we probably didn't know this has been happening for years.

If even one of the sources is livestock, fixes may take a long time.

To find out, we need the Florida and Georgia legislatures to fund water quality monitoring of all our rivers, ongoing, at least weekly, closely-spaced, all the way to the Gulf. Plus water well testing for baselines and to track contamination underground.

In January, the Florida Counties Task Force about Valdosta sewage resolved to ask the legislature to fund such testing. Madison and Hamilton County Health Departments and SRWMD are overbudget doing most of the recent Florida testing. FDEP and SRWMD are already testing at springs and monthly at half a dozen river points, so the legislature could fill in gaps in weeks and stations, from Georgia to the Gulf.

How long will Valdosta continue testing? The Georgia legislature still needs to fund the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (GA-EPD) to test regularly upstream and downstream of Valdosta, Tifton, and Quitman, to the state line. Or have GA-EPD direct Valdosta to continue thrice-weekly testing of the Withlacoochee River and Okapilco Creek. GA-EPD also needs to fund testing on



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WWALS is an IRS 501(c)(3)
nonprofit charity est. June 2012.

Mission: WWALS advocates for conservation and stewardship of the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little, Santa Fe, and Suwannee River watersheds in south Georgia and north Florida through education, awareness, environmental monitoring, and citizen activities.



the Alapaha, Alapahoochee, and Suwannee Rivers in Georgia.

Last November, Lowndes County voters approved another seven years of a penny sales tax, from which Valdosta expects to get another \$40 million for wastewater system improvements. Everyone applauds Valdosta replacing old sewer lines, fixing manhole covers, and digging a catch basin at the entrance to its Withlacoochee Wastewater Treatment Plant to head off spills like two of those of December 2018.

But we still don't know if that catch basin will be big enough. And that SCADA system for fast internal notification I applauded last letter? It was disconnected in December 2019 and not discovered for four days, in a massive failure of oversight.

Beyond better operating procedures, Valdosta needs to reimburse Madison and Hamilton Counties, Florida, well and river testing expenses since the December Valdosta spill. Valdosta has spilled far more sewage than anyone else, while Tifton, Quitman and Lowndes County, Georgia, have not reported any spills since my last letter.

As by far the biggest city in the Suwannee River Basin, Valdosta is responsible beyond just fixing its own messes. Valdosta also needs to help repair the decades-long reputational damage to the entire Suwannee River Basin. That stigma puts people off fishing, swimming, and boating, with economic effects on everyone who goes there, including from Gainesville.

New Valdosta Mayor Scott James Matheson proposed, WWALS organized, and people from Florida and Georgia attended, a Mayor's Paddle down a previously-contaminated stretch of the Withlacoochee. On May 18th, WWALS, Valdosta, and Georgia Power are co-sponsoring a cleanup at Knights Ferry Boat Ramp, famous recently for fecal bacteria, with an optional paddle 6.6 miles to Nankin Boat Ramp. Weather and bacterial tests permitting, y'all come!

There is cross-state-line eco-tourism support for a Troupville [River Camp] at the Confluence of Georgia's Little River with the Withlacoochee just west of Valdosta, connecting downstream to the Suwannee River Camps.

When are our rivers clean and not? When it is safe to paddle, swim, or fish? What are the sources? We need testing.

John S. Quarterman is Suwannee Riverkeeper. WWALS is the Waterkeeper Alliance member for the Suwannee River and all its tributaries.

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