

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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