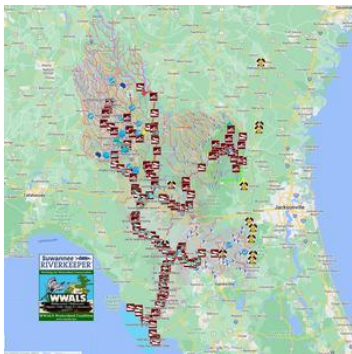
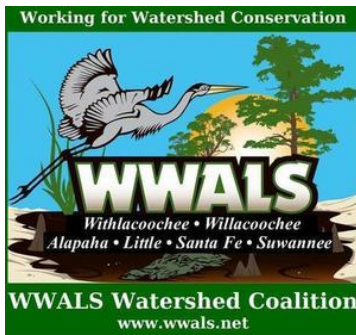


February 19, 2026



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

*WWALS advocates for conservation and stewardship of the surface waters and groundwater of the Suwannee River Basin and Estuary, in south Georgia and north Florida, among them the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little, Santa Fe, and Suwannee River watersheds, through education, awareness, environmental monitoring, and citizen activities.*



To: Columbia County Commissioners  
Cc: [bccadmin@columbiacountyfla.com](mailto:bccadmin@columbiacountyfla.com)  
Re: Water First North Florida (WFNF)

Dear Commissioners,

According to your agenda, you are hearing from SRWMD about the Water First North Florida (WFNF) plan to pipe treated wastewater from Jacksonville into wetlands in the Suwannee River Basin to recharge levels and flows in the Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and their springs.

**Here are some things you may not hear from SRWMD.**

WFNF is a big win for JEA, but a big risk for Suwannee River Basin wetlands, springs, and rivers, as well as drinking water, agriculture, industry, and recreation.

The biggest reason for low flows and levels in the Suwannee Basin is Jacksonville water withdrawals. Jacksonville should decrease or eliminate those, for example by seawater desalination.

The main intended WFNF source, the JEA Buckman wastewater plant, is under a Consent Order for exceeding limits on Chronic Whole Effluent Toxicity (WET), Aldrin and Total Cyanide, Fecal Coliform, Enterococci, and Ultraviolet Light Dosage, Total Recoverable Iron, Nickel, Copper, and Total Suspended Solids.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69415>

That is not clean enough now, and there is no reason to believe it will be by the approximately 2036 operational target for WFNF.

Yet JEA cannot continue sending its outflows into the St. Johns River, because SB 64 of 2021 prohibits nonbeneficial surface water discharge after January 2032.

<https://wwals.net/?p=69428>

**Fortunately for JEA, SB 64 has a loophole:** “403.064(17)(a)3.e. The discharge provides direct ecological or public water supply benefits, such as rehydrating wetlands or implementing the requirements of minimum flows and minimum water levels or recovery or prevention strategies for a waterbody.”

This could explain why the [JEA Board on November 18, 2025, approved \\$400 million for NFWF](#). <https://wwals.net/?p=69347>

That’s 40% of the \$1 billion cost SRWMD estimates for WFNF. See above for why JEA might want to fund much of WFNF.

**But the Suwannee Basin is already downstream from Valdosta’s frequently-spilling wastewater system. Why should we also be downstream from Jacksonville?** Why should we believe the much larger Jacksonville wastewater facilities and a 60-mile-plus WFNF pipeline would never break? **PFAS forever chemicals, drugs, and artificial sweeteners are not removed by typical wastewater treatment. Why should we risk those** in our wetlands, concentrating in vegetation and wildlife, and on to humans through hunting and fishing?

**Especially since the Suwannee Basin is not the main cause of lower flows and levels in streams and springs. Jacksonville is.**

According to the St. John River Water Management District (SJRWMD) Board meeting [agenda for November 12, 2025](#), packet pages 20 and 21:

“Impacts due to public supply withdrawals represent up to 6% and 32% of the total impacts for the SRWMD and the SJRWMD portions of the Partnership area, respectively (Tables 5 and 6). The other large use category is agricultural water use; consumptive uses authorized by an individual permit and those authorized pursuant to a general permit by rule account for up to 26% and 2% of the impacts for the SRWMD and the SJRWMD portions of the Partnership area withdrawals, respectively.”

So while agriculture is the biggest groundwater user in the Suwannee Basin, Public Supply is the biggest user in the St. Johns Basin, for the same aquifer. The entire Suwannee River Basin in Florida has maybe 300,000 people. Jacksonville proper (Duval County) has about 1 million people, or 1.3 million in the metro area. That’s 3 or 4 times as many as in the Suwannee Basin. **Jacksonville is the problem.**

**To fix lower flows and levels in the Suwannee Basin, a better solution is to reduce or eliminate Jacksonville’s groundwater withdrawals.**

WFNF only plans on sending 40 million gallons per day (mgd) to the Suwannee Basin. The Texas [Harbor Island Seawater Desalination Facility](#) produces 100 mgd of drinking water. Multiple California desalination facilities produce up to 50 mgd, such as [the one in Carlsbad](#), which dates to 2015. A desalination plant like those would do more good than NFWF.

Florida has more seawater desalination plants than any other state. [Tampa has been desalinating since 2007, and now does 25 mgd.](#)

South Florida had [40 facilities in 2023, totaling 292 mgd.](#) That’s more than twice the [120 mgd](#) JEA says it produces for its entire Water Service Area.


SRWMD says desalination is too expensive. But how do all these other places afford to do it?

With a billion dollar budget and a dozen years, it seems that SJRWMD could implement desalination in economical phases. Which would probably fix the Suwannee Basin level and flow problem. And it would also allow for future population growth of Jacksonville and its industries.

Desalination wouldn’t solve JEA’s wastewater disposal problem. **But why is that the Suwannee Basin’s problem?** There are wetlands in the St. Johns Basin, and other possible methods.

I’d be happy to speak about all this at another meeting.

Thanks for your consideration.



John S. Quarterman, Suwannee Riverkeeper and Executive Director