

Better than treated wastewater from Jacksonville into the Suwannee Basin

Why do three unelected boards want to spend \$1.1 billion for a bad solution to two water problems?

The plan is to pipe treated wastewater from the JEA Buckman wastewater plant more than 60 miles into the Suwannee Basin to replenish wetlands and raise flows and levels in springs and rivers. It's called Water First North Florida (WFNF),¹ and it's wasteful, slow, fragile, and based on unproven technology.

If it's clean enough to drink, Jacksonville can drink it. If it's not, why should the Suwannee Basin accept it to contaminate wetlands, seep into groundwater where cave divers and rare species swim, and come back up in drinking water wells and springs and rivers where people and animals swim? All twelve Suwannee Basin counties have approved a resolution against WFNF and for seawater desalination or other solutions.²

The proposal is being pushed by the unelected boards of JEA (Jacksonville's private water and wastewater utility), and the Suwannee and St. Johns River Water Management Districts (SJRWMD and SRWMD).

The \$1.1 billion cost estimate does not include building the pipelines, nor the cost of obtaining rights of way, nor operational costs. Why should people in the St. Johns Basin accept likely rate increases from cost overruns, operational costs, and lawsuits about pipelines and by neighboring landowners? JEA should line up with its own customers, "JEA is dedicated to serving our customers and delivering reliable, sustainable services at reasonable rates."³

In May we heard that, "the Water First North Florida project is being canceled in its current form."⁴ Actually, the state legislature zeroed a \$20 million line item for WFNF.⁵ But that's peanuts compared to the combined \$525 million already dedicated by JEA and SJRWMD, plus more promised by FDEP. It ain't dead yet.

People in both basins do get to vote in local, state, and federal elections. WFNF should be an issue.

The Problems

1. Low levels and flows of springs and rivers and drying wetlands are a real problem, especially in the Suwannee Basin.⁶
2. SB 64 of 2021⁷ requires wastewater outflows into rivers to cease in 2032 (or maybe later⁸) unless they are basically drinking water quality. That is likely what caused JEA's board in November 2025 to dedicate \$400 million to WFNF⁹ and the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) to dedicate \$125 million.¹⁰ SB 64 got a loophole added a few years later: if the outflow goes to replenish wetlands or increase levels and flows in springs and rivers,¹¹ it doesn't have to be clean enough to drink. That loophole conveniently matches WFNF.

Better Solutions

Less expensive, faster, and more robust solutions to each of these problems start with reducing the biggest source of water withdrawals¹² from the Floridan Aquifer in north Florida: Jacksonville.¹³ That would improve levels and flows in the Suwannee Basin. Potable reuse (recycling wastewater), brackish desalination of the St. Johns River, or seawater desalination would do that.

Potable Reuse

Other states already recycle wastewater for everything from watering lawns and golf courses to drinking.

If JEA can't remove PFAS forever chemicals and pharmaceuticals from wastewater, why should the Suwannee Basin accept it to contaminate our recreational wetlands, aquifer, springs, and rivers, and the plants and animals that live there?

If they can clean it up that much, why not feed it into Jacksonville's drinking water? That would solve problem 2 (SB 64) and help with problem 1 (low levels and flows). Or at least use it for industry, lawns, and the like.

Brackish Water Desalination

Philadelphia drinks from the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers.¹⁴ Jacksonville can drink from the St. Johns River. There are 41 brackish water desalination projects in south Florida (and two seawater desalination plants), according to the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD).¹⁵ If they can do it, JAX can do it.

Seawater Desalination

SJRWMD, SRWMD, and their partners dismissed seawater desalination as too expensive, too difficult to dispose of the resulting brine, and not solving SB 64.¹⁶

But JEA, SJRWMD, SRWMD, and their partners only considered a few projects in north Florida. It took only a few hours to find half a dozen seawater desalination projects¹⁷ in the Middle East and Australia that each cost less per million gallons per day (mgd) to build than WFNF, produce more mgd than WFNF, and took only 4 to 5 years to build, not the 13+ years of WFNF. For operational energy, Florida is the Sunshine State: use solar panels and batteries. According to JEA,¹⁸ "Generating power from the sun is one of the cleanest and greenest ways to produce electricity."

Regarding brine, the obvious course is to ask those projects what they do with it. Or ask the [numerous Texas projects](#),¹⁹ such as the [South Texas seawater desalination project](#),²⁰ which is to produce 100 mgd of drinking water.

Or look at the numerous research projects on better undersea dispersal or even on turning brine into saleable commodities. Sure, those are research. But so are JEA's attempts to remove PFAS and pharmaceuticals from treated wastewater. Even for those attempts, there are already solutions elsewhere, on the U.S. west coast.

What Counties and the People Think

Two letters sum up the Suwannee Basin reaction to WFNF.

When the Suwannee County Commission pressed a SRWMD representative on whether they got to vote on WFNF, the answer was: “No.”²¹ The Commissioners and the people of the Suwannee Basin do not take kindly to that answer. Suwannee County’s letter to SRWMD ends, *“Once the spigot is turned on, it is impossible to predict the consequences which will impact literally every person in the area. Our citizens should not suffer the consequences of such hubris.”*²²

The Hamilton County Commission wrote to SRWMD, *“Finally, the Board must note the utter disrespect that has been shown to the Board and citizens of Hamilton County.”*²³

There are letters or resolutions from seven counties and one town so far. And all twelve counties in the Suwannee Basin signed on to two resolutions against WFNF and asking for better solutions. See <https://wwals.net/issues/wfnf>

Let’s hear what people, cities, and counties in the St. Johns Basin think about this bad WFNF plan.

What Is To Be Done

WFNF needs to be halted until there is real research into how to solve both problems in better ways.

And until those solutions have real oversight by elected officials.

A few years ago, after massive public opposition, the governor withdrew the plan to put golf courses in state parks. The next year the legislature passed a law against doing that.²⁴

The legislature should pass a law prohibiting inter-basin transfers of wastewater, treated or not.

And the legislature should fund and direct potable reuse and desalination to fix both problems. Not just for Jacksonville and the Suwannee Basin, for all of Florida.

You can help. There’s an election going on. Ask all the candidates about this.

Meanwhile, ask the JEA, SJRWMD, and SRWMD boards, and all your elected officials to stop WFNF and to provide better solutions to both problems.

John S. Quarterman is the Suwannee Riverkeeper and the Executive Director of WWALS Watershed Coalition, Inc., a 501(c)(3) educational nonprofit working to keep the waters clean in the 10,000 square miles of the Suwannee River Basin in Florida and Georgia. <https://wwals.net>

Endnotes

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