



## Agenda Item Summary

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**Agenda Item Name:**

**Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers Min Flows and Levels – North Florida Regional Water Supply Plan Update**

**Presenter:**

Stacie Greco, Environmental Program Manager, Environmental Protection Department, 352-264-6829

**Description:**

The Water Management Districts and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection have been working on updating the Minimum Flows and Levels (MFL) and Prevention and Recovery Plan for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers since 2019. The North Florida Regional Water Supply plan was updated in December 2023. Staff will provide a high-level summary of these processes and how they relate to Alachua County programs.

**Recommended Action:**

Listen to Staff presentation

**Prior Board Motions:**

The Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) adopted a motion to send a chair letter about the North Florida Regional Water Supply Plan at the 12/12/23 BOCC meeting.

**Fiscal Note:**

N/A

**Strategic Guide:**

Environment

**Background:**

Florida's Water Management Districts are required to create Regional Water Supply Plans to assess current and future water demand, determine the potential impacts of groundwater withdrawals on natural resources, and identify projects to meet future water needs while protecting the environment. According to the 2023 plan, population in this region is expected to increase by nearly one million people (49% increase), irrigated agricultural land is expected to increase by 30,000 acres (24% increase), and total water use is expected to increase by 168 million gallons per day (32% increase) - of which 135 million gallons per day (MGD) is fresh groundwater (29% increase). The plan lists projects to offset 143.6 MGD as water supply/resource development at an estimated cost of \$2.17 billion and only 16.8 MGD as water conservation projects at an estimated cost of \$57.5 million, highlighting the concerning trend of relying on expensive projects rather than adopting policies and

regulatory measures to reduce demand.

The establishment of Minimum Flows and Levels (MFLs) is required by state law under Subsection 373.042(2), Florida Statutes (F.S.). The MFLs are developed by the Water Management Districts and adopted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP). MFLs set water levels and flows to prevent significant harm to the water resources or ecology from water withdrawals. MFLs protect non-consumptive uses of water that include water necessary for navigation and recreation, for fish and wildlife habitat, and for other natural resources in accordance with Chapter 62-40, Florida Administrative Code (F.A.C.).

The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) established the first MFL for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and Springs in 2015. Through this process the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers were determined to be in recovery, meaning water levels were below the established MFL threshold and that consumptive water use would need to be reduced to protect the resource. The Recovery Strategy for the Lower Santa Fe River Basin was published in April 2014 and it outlines projects and policies to meet the MFL.

Water Management and FDEP Staff are currently updating the MFL rule for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and Springs, and it is anticipated that it will be submitted in 2025 for ratification. There are two components of this proposed new minimum flow rule. The first is a scientific assessment of the two rivers at three designated compliance points. The Lower Santa Fe River Ft. White gage was reported as meeting the MFL, while the Lower Santa Fe HWY 441 and Ichetucknee HWY 27 gages were reported as in recovery and not meeting the MFL. These designations trigger the need for the second component, which is a Recovery Plan, for the two gages that are not meeting the MFL.

The draft regulatory strategies that have been presented to the public by FDEP contains three parts: a water-use permitting strategy released in December 2021, public-supply (water utilities) strategy released in April 2022, and an agricultural conservation strategy also released in April 2022. If these regulatory strategies are adopted as currently drafted, they would authorize the use of far better tools for restoring river flows than currently exist under the 2015 plan.