

St. Johns RIVERKEEPER is a 501 (c) 3, nonprofit advocacy organization. Our mission is to be an independent voice that defends, advocates, and activates others to protect and restore the St. Johns River. Responses to this survey will be made public to our members and supporters.



## St. Johns RIVERKEEPER Candidate Survey November 2018

Responses to this survey will be posted on our website at [www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org](http://www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org) and shared with over 20,000 members, followers and supporters throughout the state of Florida.

### **Threats to the River's Health**

The health of the St. Johns River is threatened by many activities and problems, including:

- Pollution from excessive nutrients that cause toxic algal blooms, including fertilizers, stormwater runoff, municipal wastewater, septic tanks, sewage sludge (aka biosolids), industrial discharges, and agriculture;
- Fecal bacteria pollution from failing septic tanks, leaking sewage pipes, sanitary sewer overflows (SSO's), and animal waste;
- Over-pumping from the aquifer and reduced spring flows;
- Sedimentation from construction-site runoff that degrades water quality and the health of creeks and tributaries;
- Sea level rise that increases saltwater intrusion, water levels, and storm surge, and projects like dredging that will exacerbate these problems without mitigation;
- Loss of wetlands, springsheds, aquifer recharge areas, and other environmentally-sensitive lands due to rapid growth and development and lack of funding appropriated for acquisition;
- Elimination or weakening of environmental rules and regulations and lack of enforcement by state agencies for wastewater discharge and other permit violations.

#### **1. *What do you consider to be the biggest threats to the health of the St. Johns River and its watershed and, if elected, what will you do to address these problems?***

All eight of these threats are serious, and we need a holistic approach to repair and protect the St. John's River (along with our other waterways). Reducing pollution is priority number one – we need to restrict runoff, regulate septic tanks, and hold polluters accountable. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) under the control of Governor Rick Scott has evolved to be little more than a rubber stamp for developers. We need to bring the "P" back to the FDEP, and ensure that there is a fully functioning and funded state agency that embraces science and accepts the realities of climate change.

As a campaign, we have committed to not take any money from US Sugar, or from companies who make the majority of their revenue from fossil fuels. We support energy creation that is clean and sustainable, and will do our part to build an eco-friendly state.

### **Pollution**

Unfortunately, the St. Johns River and its tributaries are receiving too much nitrogen and phosphorous from failing septic tanks, stormwater runoff, fertilizers, wastewater treatment plants, industrial discharges, and sewage sludge.

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Excessive nutrients feed uncontrolled algal blooms that deplete oxygen in the water needed by fish, reduce light that is essential to submerged aquatic vegetation (SAVs), and threaten the health of both humans and aquatic life by emitting toxins. Toxic algal blooms and pollution also hurt businesses (marinas, kayak outfitters, fishing guides, realtors, boat dealers, restaurants, hotels, etc.), cost jobs, reduce property values and our tax base, and diminish recreational opportunities.

Potential policy solutions include: Increase awareness about proper use and application of fertilizers, increase funding to remove failing septic tanks, implement septic tank inspection program, increase enforcement actions on utilities for frequent sewage spills and permit violations, and prohibiting use of sewage sludge near waterbodies

**2. What do you see as the most effective and necessary steps to protect the St. Johns from nutrient pollution and prevent algae blooms?**

I would love to see an evolution in the state that moves us away from septic tanks and towards municipal water lines. At the very least, they should be better regulated. As mentioned above, I support policies that hold polluters accountable, and would support a proactive approach that prevents sewage accidents from happening in the first place. Cultural eutrophication is dangerous and all too common – any and all efforts to reduce the flow of trace elements to our waterways should be explored, and pursued.

**Septic Tanks**

Thirty percent of the people in Florida rely on an estimated 2.6 million septic tanks for their wastewater disposal.

Thousands of these septic tanks are failing or malfunctioning, allowing bacteria, nitrogen, and other contaminants (pharmaceuticals, hormones, etc.) to leach into our waterways. While the 2017 Water Bill did provide programs and funding to remove some failing and poorly located septic tanks, more funding is needed and little is being done to curb the high volume of new septic tanks permits that are issued every day by county health departments. Developers of new subdivisions and single family homes are often not required or provided incentives to connect to existing water lines, or develop in areas where wastewater infrastructure already exists.

**3. Would you support more funding for septic tank remediation and/or policies that protect waterways and sensitive lands by placing more stringent permit requirements on new septic tanks?**

Yes.

**4. Would you support a septic tank inspection program and requirements to properly maintain and repair septic tanks, when necessary? If not, please explain your answer.**

Yes.

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## Wetlands

Since the early 1900's, Florida has lost nearly 44% of its original wetlands. Yet, thousands of acres of wetlands continue to be destroyed each year throughout the state. Wetlands are critical for water quality, fish and wildlife habitat, groundwater recharge, storm and flood protection, and filters for our waterways. A 2015 University of North Florida economic study of the Lower St. Johns River found that "wetlands result in almost \$3 billion dollars in savings for flood prevention or \$15,000 for each residence within the flood zone, and the wetlands provide an economic value for nutrient removal that exceeds \$400 million/year for Nitrogen and \$5.3 million /year for Phosphorous."

5. **Which statement best describes your perceptions of our current wetland protections?**
- Current rules and regulations are sufficient to adequately protect wetlands.**
  - Current rules and regulations are not sufficient to adequately protect wetlands and need to be strengthened or improved.**
  - Current rules and regulations are excessive and need to be curtailed.**
  - Current rules and regulations are sufficient but are burdensome to businesses and need to be curtailed in order to stimulate job growth.**

## Water Conservation and Supply

The State of Florida is already reaching the sustainable limits of its predominant source of water, the Floridan Aquifer. Current water supply plans are looking to draw on surface water from our rivers and lakes in order to meet future demand. The St. Johns River Water Management District has developed plans to withdraw up to 160 million gallons of surface water a day from the St. Johns River. Removing millions of gallons a day from the flow of the river or its tributaries, such as Black Creek and the Ocklawaha River, will worsen existing pollution problems, increase salinity levels, and adversely impact the fisheries, wildlife, and submerged vegetation in and along the St. Johns. We are committed to preventing withdrawals and advocating for more sensible solutions, such as water conservation and the reuse of reclaimed water. Some of the proven conservation strategies include, tiered utility rates, incentives for the purchase of water-efficient plumbing fixtures and appliances, incentives for water-efficient landscaping and building practices, water audits, mobile irrigation labs, Consumptive Use Permit fees based on the quantity of water used, and building codes that require water-efficient fixtures and irrigation systems.

6. **What will you do to demonstrate leadership on water conservation to ensure that proven reuse and conservation strategies are implemented and water is conserved and more efficiently utilized in Florida?**

For starters my office would be a lead voice on water conservation efforts in and around the district. Whether that means hosting local community events about water conservation, or working alongside local nonprofits and/or using social media to spread the message and

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awareness—we want to do it all! If there are incentives we can offer to help with water conservation, we will pursue that too.

**7. Currently, Consumptive Use Permits (CUPs) do not include a fee based on the quantity of water used by the applicant. Would you support a fee on water withdrawn from the aquifer?**

Yes, I would want more insight on what a reasonable fee looks like, and what has worked in other parts of the nation and world.

### **Springs Protection**

Florida's springs are unique and iconic natural treasures of our state, with a greater concentration of springs in Florida than in any other region of the world. More than 100 springs are located within the St. Johns River watershed providing approximately 30% of the flow. Unfortunately, many of our springs are in serious decline due to encroaching development, agricultural and urban runoff, groundwater pollution, failing septic tanks, and the reduction in levels of our underground aquifers.

As a result, many springs have experienced significant decreases in flow, water clarity, and fish biomass with alarming increases in nitrate levels and algal blooms. Silver Springs, a National Natural Landmark, is a perfect example of the tragic situation that is taking place. Discharge rates have declined from a historic average of about 824 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 465 cfs in 2017, which is a 43% reduction in flow since 1955. Fish biomass has decreased by 92%. Nitrates have increased from an average background level of less than 0.05 milligrams per liter (mg/l) to an average above 1 mg/l which represents about a 20- fold increase.

One of the major contributors to a decline in the health of Silver Springs is the existence of the Kirkpatrick Dam or Rodman Pool on the Ocklawaha River. The Dam has flooded more than 7,500 acres of forested wetlands, 16 miles of river and at least 20 springs. It also blocks passageway for migratory fish and manatees that historically wintered at Silver Springs.

**8. What kinds of measures would you support to protect our springs and springsheds?**

This is such a complex problem! Holding polluters accountable and reducing the entry of nitrates into our waterways and springs is step number one. I also wonder what efforts can we take to restore the original paths of these waterways.

**9. Would you support breaching the Kirkpatrick Dam and restoring natural flow to the St. Johns, Ocklawaha, and Silver rivers? Why or why not?**

Yes! Would want to learn more and understand the cost of this too.

### **Resiliency**

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It is estimated that 28% of Florida's total assets are located within the 100-year floodplain, or \$714 billion. Climate scientists are predicting slower, wetter and more intense storms, further increasing the risk to low-lying communities in the state. When widespread flooding occurs, water can infiltrate pipes causing sewer systems to back up and sewage to be discharged into nearby streets and waterways. Over 28 million gallons of wastewater spilled across Florida in the wake of Hurricane Irma. For septic tank users, rising groundwater levels prevent proper drainage, causing them to back up and overflow. Blooms that can be toxic to fish, wildlife, and humans can grow. Flood waters also often flush chemicals and contaminants from roads, parking lots and industrial and hazardous waste sites into surrounding neighborhoods and our river, creating additional health hazards.

### **10. What policies or programs would you support that aim to protect our communities from rising waters?**

Well for starters I 100% believe in science and climate change. I actually was a lead organizer for the past two "March for Science" events in Orlando, and believe firmly in making decisions and crafting policy based on evidence and research.

In the case of rising sea levels: research does tell us that if we take action NOW to reduce the human impact of climate change we can potentially curb the warming of the Earth. This means reducing our carbon footprint, transitioning to renewable energy resources, and reducing our consumption and waste.

Knowing that sea levels are already rising means we have to protect our coast lines immediately. Sea walls and water pumps (as we've seen in South Florida) are examples of this. However, I remain concerned about the constant development of our coastlines (putting more people at risk and adding to the increase of erosion) and want to ensure our low-income communities are prepared to handle rising sea levels too.

Communities that lack resources and efficacy are ALWAYS more negatively impacted by extreme weather, and it's our responsibility as policy makers to ensure that all people (no matter their income or zipcode) are prepared for emergency situations, like extreme weather and rising sea levels.

### **Growth Management**

Growth management policies and programs that influence new development in order to promote sustainable communities and protect our environment have been cut or weakened in the last eight years. Incentives and requirements for redevelopment, green infrastructure, and low impact development are often not strong enough or do not exist in many communities. Unsustainable growth and the development of environmentally-sensitive regions of our state impacts water quality through wetland loss and stormwater runoff, makes us more vulnerable to storms and flooding, fragments wildlife corridors and destroys habitat, and requires costly new roads, infrastructure and services that some municipalities may not be able to adequately provide for its residents.

### **11. Do you support growth management policies that promote, encourage, or require sustainable development practices? If so, please describe the type of**

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***policies that you think are necessary to better manage growth in our state and more effectively protect our waterways and natural resources.***

Absolutely! As I said before, we need to bring the “P” back to FDEP!

### **Conservation Land**

A huge majority – over 75 percent – of Florida voters approved the Water and Land Conservation Amendment to the Florida Constitution in November 2014. The title was clear: “Dedicates funds to acquire and restore Florida conservation and recreation lands.” The amendment requires that 33 percent of the proceeds from the already existing real estate documentary-stamp taxes go for land acquisition. A judge ruled in June 2018 that the state legislature to date has failed to appropriately allocate these funds based on the voter intent and the language of the State Constitution.

***12. Do you think the Florida Legislature has properly and sufficiently allocated funds from the real estate documentary-stamp tax for land acquisition? What expenses do you think are appropriate for the use of these dedicated funds and what type of land conservation projects do you think should be prioritized by the state?***

Nope! The Florida Legislature used this money inappropriately and that is most disgusting as it is shameful. The appropriate use of these funds are what the voters asked us to do: conservation of our lands and waterways. These funds should be used to enhance our conservation efforts, not offset other costs that deal with state parks, etc.