

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 has numerous challenges, 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 and 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?**

**1) pollution from ground application of class B sludge, traditional septic tanks and stormwater runoff from development areas**

**2) loss of connected wetland systems or greenways**

**3) salt water intrusion and spring degradation from excessive draw down of fresh groundwater**

**4) legacy pollution from discontinued agricultural operations**

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**To address pollution and excessive nutrients from septic tanks and stormwater runoff we need to:**

***Incentivize connections to sewer in priority areas through low interest revolving loans funds and grants for low income areas. Require new developments not served by central sewer to utilize a distributive septic tank system which have been proven effective in removal of nutrients.***

***It is critical that we update the rules for Class B sludge from water utilities to ensure that phosphate are accounted and adjust the application rate adjusted to prevent excess loading of nutrients in Florida's waters. This is likely a factor in the increased rate and intensity of noxious algal blooms in our region.***

***Fund matching grant projects to reduce the nutrient load to Florida's waters to restore & maintain the health of Florida's impaired waterways. Sadly, this could also take time. Nutrients like phosphates build up not just in the land, but also in the water. From what I have seen at the efforts to restore Lake Apopka, this can be a slow and costly process.***

**To reduce the loss of our connected wetland system we need to:**

***Encourage land preservation and mitigation that prioritize areas that are part of the greenway and blueway plans adopted by local governments and reward mitigation proximate to impacts to prevent flooding and keep natural systems intact. Implementing these plans would help maintain sustainable natural systems that keep our air and water clean and provide recreational opportunities as well. The Florida House understands the importance of these systems. I was able to get a recommendation in the Florida House Select Committee on Hurricane Response and Preparedness to prioritize funding to complete greenways plans.***

**To protect our fresh groundwater from salt water intrusion we need to:**

***Require water conservation measures for local governments in their rules regulating new development and redevelopment plans when they apply for their Consumptive Use Permit.***

***Require utilities to use progressive block rates for residential customers. In this way everyone has access to affordable water and users have a financial signal to use water wisely.***

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***Promote a water ethic for citizens and businesses including a regional award program for businesses to be presented by the Governor in recognition of voluntary efforts.***

### **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.

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, increased 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

***What do you see as the most effective and necessary steps to protect the St. Johns from nutrient pollution and prevent algae blooms? To address pollution and excessive nutrients from septic tanks and stormwater runoff we need to:***

***Incentivize connections to sewer in priority areas through low interest revolving loans funds and grants for low income areas. Require new developments not served by central sewer to utilize a distributive septic tank system which have been proven effective in removal of nutrients.***

***It is critical that we immediately update the rules for Class B sludge from water utilities to ensure that phosphate are accounted and adjust the application rate to prevent excess loading of nutrients in Florida's waters.***

***Fund matching grant projects to reduce the nutrient load to Florida's waters to restore & maintain the health of Florida's impaired waterways through creation, protection and restoration of wetland systems.***

***Protect wetlands and wetland systems.***

### **Septic Tanks**

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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. New septic tanks permits that are issued every day by county health departments. Developers of new subdivisions and single family homes could be required to develop in areas where sewer systems already exist or to extend sewer systems into the area they are developing.

- 2. 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, for proven systems like distributive septic tank systems.**

- 3. 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, if it is a proven cost-effective way to reduce nutrient load.**

### **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."

- 4. Which statement best describes your perceptions of our current wetland protections?**

**Current rules and regulations are not sufficient to adequately protect wetlands and need to be strengthened or improved.**

**The way we identify wetland seems objective if applied fairly. I have concerns how impacts are mitigated. Our highest quality wetlands should be off limits for mitigation unless the impacts are unavoidable for critical infrastructure. Additionally, mitigation should occur closer to the impacts, especially if that helps keep connected wetlands and flow ways intact.**

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## **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.

- 5. 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?***

***Focus on fixing the rules to prevent excess phosphate from being added to our waters from ground application of Class B sludge.***

***Focus on strategies including land acquisition to keep greenways and natural flow ways from impairment.***

***Support regional citizens academies to help Floridians, better understand Florida's water, our opportunity and challenges & helping them understand their role in our watersheds and promote Florida Friendly Yards and energy and water efficient appliances and construction.***

- 6. 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?***

***We can get more benefit for our water resources through requirements than a pay and go system to tax water consumption. We all pay for treatment and transmission of the water we use but not the resource itself. That is regulated through the CUP process overseen by our Water Management Districts. I especially like that our Districts are oriented around the resources they are charged with protecting.***

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***Since water is regularly imported and exported from Florida in an assortment of products that range from watermelon and cantaloupe to soda and beer, I would be concerned about the unintended consequences especially to agriculture and forests in Florida. Well managed agricultural lands and timberlands are part of the solution to Florida's water and growth management issues and contribute to our open space and over all they are excellent stewards of their land and Florida's water. Furthermore, they make important contributions to Florida's economy.***

### **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.

***7. What kinds of measures would you support to protect our springs and spring sheds? Our springs and spring sheds are some of our most vulnerable and beautiful natural areas. They are literally a window into the world of our underground water system. They deserve and require protection, even greater than that needed for all of Florida's waters from overpumping, development of wetland buffers as well as from any type of pollution from surface or from injection into the ground. While we need to better understand all of Florida's geology to prevent groundwater impairment, we should start with these most vulnerable areas.***

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

***I have not studied this issue & therefore have not formed an opinion.***

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## **Resiliency**

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.

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

**Last session, filed a bill that would fund the acquisition of vulnerable land from our development areas that has been subject to repeat damage from willing sellers.**

**I also made recommendations that were included in the House Select Committee on Hurricane Response and Recovery report that the two priorities listed below be state priorities to improve our resilience and reduce future flood damage:**

**Certain water infrastructure including water treatment plants need to be systematically moved inland to prevent flooding or hardened/elevated. New facilities need to be located with these issues in mind. The same strategy needs to be adopted for other facilities. This was among the recommendations from the Florida House Select Committee on Hurricane Recovery and Preparation that I served on after Irma.**

**We also need to protect our greenways and flow ways to connected wetlands. This will help protect land in the watershed from flooding.**

## **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.

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**10. Do you support growth management policies that promote, encourage, or require sustainable development practices? If so, please describe the type of policies that you think are necessary to better manage growth in our state and more effectively protect our waterways and natural resources.**

**Yes, I support smart growth. Purchasing development rights and preserving greenways, wetlands and flow ways combined with a strong agriculture and timber industry are ways to encourage smart growth.**

**Another way is to give price signals to consumers about growth. This can include requiring new growth pay its fair share of costs for new infrastructure and reducing the cost of re-development of aging and blighted development areas. For example, funding to remediate brownfield sites or revolving loans to repair outdated water and sewer infrastructure can remove cost barriers to redevelopment.**

**In addition to cost, sprawl is driven by consumer choice. Factors that could make consumers choose longer commutes from suburban neighborhoods include lifestyle choices and proximity to employment centers or the desire to be near the water. They can include choosing a community with a school system or concerns over safety. Factors that result in sprawl are complex and largely consumer driven, I support those rights to choose where you want to live. When it comes to avoidance issues like safety and sprawl, every community and every zip code deserves to have access to good schools and safe neighborhoods and getting at the root causes of intergenerational poverty. Like keeping our waterways clean, it is difficult work that requires many stakeholders to be invested in it to achieve success.**

### **Conservation Land**

Florida voters overwhelmingly 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.

**11. 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?**

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***This year more than \$100 million was set aside for Florida Forever to purchase environmentally sensitive land. This is the largest amount set aside for land acquisition in Florida since the Great Recession.***

***In addition, during my service in the Florida house, there has been a significant increase in funding to restore Florida's Everglades, Lake Apopka and Florida's Springs in addition to maintain forests and state parks and the eradication of exotic invasive plants and animals. As far as the funding of Florida Forever, I support more consistent funding to that program. I think we can do a lot of good with these funds if they are wisely invested. I supported this amendment, but before doing so carefully read the wording of the full constitutional amendment language. I believe we have complied with the amendment language.***

***Here is a summary of the amendment language:***

***Water and Land Conservation-Dedicates funds to acquire and restore Florida conservation and recreation lands***

***Funds the Land Acquisition Trust Fund are to be used to acquire, restore, improve, and manage conservation lands including wetlands and forests; fish and wildlife habitat, lands protecting water resources and drinking water sources, including the Everglades, and the water quality of rivers, lakes and streams, beaches and shores, outdoor recreation lands; and historic or geologic sites by dedicated 33% of net revenues from the existing excise tax on documents for 20 years.***

***Included in the full version it adds that money can cover debt payments on land purchases and pay for staff and equipment needed for the management and restoration of natural systems but that those funds will not be commingled with general revenue and expenses. It is my understanding that the State has complied with the intent of the law.***