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Rally for a new water ethic precedes state workshop

By [Morgan Watkins](#)

Staff writer

Published: Wednesday, January 22, 2014 at 7:59 p.m.

Wrapped in scarves and winter coats, around two dozen water conservation advocates met downtown Wednesday morning to demonstrate their support for a statewide campaign to create a new water ethic in Florida.

The local rally was part of a day of action promoting the Floridians' Clean Water Declaration Campaign and preceded a Florida Department of Environmental Protection workshop on proposed protections for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee rivers as well as springs nearby.

Around 9 a.m. Wednesday, a few of the people who had assembled in front of the Alachua County Administration Building began handing out blue-and-green tie-dyed flags while others signed the Floridians' Clean Water Declaration. The declaration states, among other things, that protecting Florida's waters and the people who depend on them from privatization and over-consumption is a responsibility shared by state government, state residents and the industries benefiting from Florida's natural resources.

Eventually, the advocates all lined up on the sidewalk in front of the county building to hear from a few speakers.

Some hoisted the tie-dye flags while others held signs with water-saving messages, including one that showed a woman paddling down an algae-covered river with the words "Visit Florida?" superimposed over the sign.

Bob Knight, president of the Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute, said Florida's water problems are getting worse and that it's time for the state to address the issue holistically.

"We can't just throw money at the problem," he said.

Local nature photographer John Moran, co-director of the Springs Eternal Project, also spoke.

A woman at the rally suggested he talk about Gov. Rick Scott's Tuesday announcement that he will designate \$55 million in his 2014-2015 budget proposal for springs protection and restoration.

"Oh, don't get me going on Gov. Scott," Moran joked. But, he said, even the governor has admitted Florida has a problem when it comes to water.

Moran questioned whether \$55 million, which equates roughly to the cost of a cheeseburger for each Floridian, is enough to deal with this problem.

Doug Finger/The Gainesville Sun
Tina Henize, of Brooksville, Fla., in Hernando County, attends the Florida Dept. of Environmental Protection's meeting on Minimum Flows and Levels proposed by the Suwannee River Water Management District at the County Commission Building in Gainesville Wednesday, January 22, 2014.

Cathy Harrelson, a Florida organizer with the Gulf Restoration Network, said part of the statewide campaign will entail asking state representatives to sign the declaration. Whether they do or they don't, the campaign will make it known.

"They're either on the side of water or they're against it," she said.

County Commissioners Mike Byerly and Robert "Hutch" Hutchinson dropped by to sign the declaration before heading into the county building to attend the state DEP's second workshop regarding its impending adoption of a rule that would set minimum flows and levels, or MFLs, and related recovery strategies for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee rivers as well as nearby springs.

Both rivers are expected to be already below the MFLs when they are adopted, necessitating the implementation of the recovery plan.

This would be the DEP's first time adopting MFLs, which set the levels above which permitting can be done without causing significant environmental harm to a water body.

The MFLs would apply to both the Suwannee River Water Management District, which asked the DEP to adopt this rule, and the St. Johns River Water Management District.

From a podium inside the packed conference room, Janet Llewellyn, a policy administrator for the DEP's Office of Water Policy, led the proceedings.

Written comments will be accepted until Feb. 5, she said, after which the agency will finalize the proposed rule. People can submit comments to Rule62_42comments@dep.state.fl.us.

Llewellyn said a controversial proposal included in the rule involves limiting some consumptive use permits to five years, although longer durations could be available if the impact of the groundwater withdrawals is offset through other efforts.

"The whole idea is to gradually recover — to keep people using water productively and efficiently, finding other sources and recovering over time so nobody gets a switch flipped on them immediately," she said. "The rules are most stringent on brand-new quantities. They basically have to offset their impact to the MFL in order to get a permit."

R. Thomas Kiger, a hydrologist with SRWMD, told the audience at the workshop that the recovery strategy will take a phased approach, with the first phase beginning with the DEP's adoption of the MFLs and related recovery strategies.

Kiger said it is estimated that about \$91 million will need to be spent through 2030 to achieve and maintain recovery for these rivers and their springs, which will involve implementing related recovery projects.

During public comment, Rick Hutton, a supervising engineer at Gainesville Regional Utilities, said GRU, which is up for renewing its withdrawal permit, is concerned about the potential five-year limitation.

"We would much rather have a 20-year permit with the understanding that we fully intend to participate in the recovery plans for the MFLs once they're finally set," he said.

Jean Wonser, with the Circle Pine Farm conservation easement in Gilchrist County, said she doesn't think the support for many of the water usages seen in this part of Florida can continue. Everyone needs to stop wasting the state's water, she said.

"So we've got to figure out how to say 'No,' bottom line," she said.

After the workshop, Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson, president of Our Santa Fe River, said she thought the session went well because so many stakeholders attended. She supports the DEP's adoption of these MFLs, although she would like to see more conservation efforts implemented along with various recovery projects.

Her organization also continues to advocate for a moratorium on large consumptive use permits of 100,000 gallons or more until the science shows if it's safe to issue them without harming area waters.

Contact Morgan Watkins at 338-3104 or morgan.watkins@gainesville.com.

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