

# Water - Resource sustainability requires planning and action

by

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Florida's population is predicted to break 20 million by the end of 2015. Nowhere will the strain on the state's natural resources be more pronounced than on its water supply, making 2014 a good year to start managing water resources more assertively.

Some Florida communities have taken noteworthy steps toward water sustainability. When Gainesville Regional Utilities, which serves the city and surrounding area, began seeking a 20-year groundwater pumping permit from the St. Johns River Water Management District last year, it decided it would ask to withdraw no more water than it is allowed to take now — saying essentially it can accommodate an expected 24% increase in customers over the next 20 years with conservation measures and increased use of reclaimed water. The Gainesville region has a strong, well-planned growth agenda, so its approach isn't some tree-hugger anti-business tactic.

A number of regions in Florida, including central Florida, have overdrawn their groundwater accounts, with additional pumping from aquifers likely to cause major environmental harm. Already, groundwater pumping and pollution have done significant damage to Florida's springs — environmental jewels with economic heft as major tourist attractions.

Short-term, the state's water management districts would do well to turn Gainesville's approach into policy and begin to manage water resources in the black, allowing no net increase in groundwater pumping as they renew consumptive use permits by utilities, businesses, farms and others.

Longer term, the state may want to review a measure advocated in 1989 by a task force-type group, the Water Resource Commission, convened by Gov. Bob Martinez. That group recommended collecting a fee from all users based on water used, with credits given for aquifer recharge, use of reclaimed water, reverse osmosis and other technologies. Funds from the fee were to go into development of alternative sources of water, reuse systems, protection of recharge areas and incentives for conservation. Agriculture and utilities don't like the idea, but there are many ways to structure fees to be fair.

The state needs to act. As Florida sues Georgia for consuming river water, including water from the Apalachee River, that our state needs for the shellfish beds in Appalachicola Bay and the Gulf, there's no small awkwardness in the fact that in the last decade, the metro Atlanta region has marshaled a large group of water agencies and local governments behind water conservation efforts that now include a rainwater harvesting program. Per-capita usage in the Atlanta region fell 15% from 2006 to 2009 while the population has increased 6%.

Florida's beef with Atlanta is real, but so is our own failure so far to aggressively take the kind of steps we need to in our own back yard

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