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Key leaders downplay possibility of big changes in water law this session

Bruce Ritchie, 02/11/2014 - 05:07 PM

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Florida DEP Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr., left, talks water issues at the Florida Chamber event Tuesday. Other panelists were Rep. Steve Crisafulli, center, and David Childs, a lawyer with the Hopping Green & Sams law firm in Tallahassee. Ph

Key state leaders on Tuesday emphasized that the Legislature won't delve too deeply into water law changes this year and that future legislative sessions will be needed to tackle the issue.

While water is shaping up to be a big issue in the session that starts March 4, the focus may be more on spending to deal with water issues rather than on changes in water law.

Five senators are working on legislation to provide funding for springs restoration and sewer hookups to protect groundwater.

House Speaker Will Weatherford said during an interview Tuesday he wouldn't say what the House will do on that issue. He said some water policy will be addressed but all of the water issues facing the state will not be.

"It's such a big issue -- it is so complex," he told *The Florida Current*. "I don't know that you can bite it off in one year."

Weatherford said water issues have been delegated to **Rep. Steve Crisafulli**, R-Merritt Island and House Republican leader, and **Rep. Jim Boyd**, R-Bradenton and chairman of the **House State Affairs Committee**.

Water concerns include the fate of springs threatened by nutrient pollution and over-pumping, discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the Indian River Lagoon and Caloosahatchee rivers, and a legal fight with Georgia over water flowing into Florida's Apalachicola River.

After a meeting with lobbyists to discuss draft springs legislation, **Sen. Charlie Dean**, R-Inverness and the Senate environmental committee chairman, said he plans to meet with Crisafulli to press the need for springs legislation.

"I really think the House will look at that and say, 'Wow, we need to be a part of that too,'" Dean said.

Asked whether springs legislation is needed, **Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Herschel T. Vinyard Jr.** said, "We can let the Legislature decide that. What I'm going to do and what I've been doing is saying, 'Let's take the steps necessary to protect our springs.'"

He said DEP did not establish its first cleanup plan for springs until 2012 when it developed a basin management action plan for more than 70 springs along the Santa Fe River. Plans will be developed for another 140 or more springs in 2014, he said.

"That is dramatic," Vinyard told the *Current*. "And we did it with the tools we have in our toolbox



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today."

Some environmentalists argue that those plans are weak or fail to adequately identify agricultural contributors to nutrients in springs. They support legislation to establish timetables and mandates for state agencies to act.

Vinyard spoke at the **Florida Chamber of Commerce** "Capitol Days" event in Tallahassee. During a video presentation at the event, **Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam** said Florida must invest in projects to meet its future water needs.

"Our water policy has to be long term," he said. "This is not something that one session is going to fix."

Crisafulli, speaking on a Chamber event panel with Vinyard and attorney **David Childs**, said there are water issues facing every region of the state and the issue is comprehensive.

"The reality is, and we can all agree, we're not going to solve this this year," he said. "We are not going to solve this next year. This is a long-term commitment we each have to make with regards to this issue."

Reporter *Bruce Ritchie* can be reached at britchie@thefloridacurrent.com.

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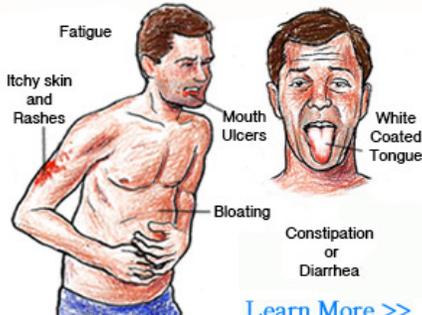
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