



FLORIDA SPRINGS COUNCIL'S VIEWS ON 2016-2017 SPRINGS FUNDING

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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GAINESVILLE, FL – Earlier this week, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) released a list of 35 springs-related restoration projects selected for funding in the 2016-2017 State budget cycle. The projects total \$57 million in DEP funds, with an additional \$33 million in matching funds. Springs restoration is expected to receive at least \$1 billion in State funding over the next 20 years.

The Florida Springs Council (FSC) is a consortium of 36 organizations whose 150,000+ members share a deep concern with the health and restoration of Florida's springs. One year ago, in this letter, FSC shared with DEP its recommendations on how to make the selection process for springs funding as fair, comprehensive, and effective as possible:

<http://springsforever.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015.07-06-FSC-Letter-to-Drew-Bartlett-re-Springs-Funding.pdf>

FSC commends DEP for utilizing in this year's cycle some of the strategies recommended by FSC in that 2015 letter. Specifically, FSC had recommended that:

“DEP should begin to utilize springs money to buy out the most polluting farms or pay for conservation easements on these farms, much as the State did when it moved polluting dairies out of South Florida. Paying a farmer to convert from growing tomatoes to growing long-leaf pine is a far more effective strategy than paying the farmer to pollute just a little bit less”.

The 2016-2017 funding from DEP includes \$12.5 million for Gainer, Cypress, and Ichetucknee Springs for lands purchases, land easements, and conversions to low-nutrient-input agriculture.

This is an excellent first step in springs restoration. Most of Florida's major springs will never be restored to health without a significant decrease – in some cases up to 90% or more – of the nutrient input deposited in springsheds. These land purchases and easements are especially timely given the failure of the Florida legislature to provide healthy funding for land purchases and easements under Amendment 1.

The process for funding springs restoration still has much room for improvement. For each funded project, DEP show projected benefits in terms of pounds of nutrient removed or gallons of water saved, or both. Some of DEP's calculated benefits clearly require further explanation. One project, for example, will supposedly remove 66,000 pounds of nitrogen for \$1 million, while another would remove only 318 pounds for \$1.27 million. DEP is now well into its third year of utilizing a dedicated funding stream for springs restoration projects. The agency should also be well into the serious work of assessing whether claims of efficacy on earlier projects are being met, and if not, why not. Sound management demands this sort of assessment, but there is no indication from DEP's press materials that this process is underway.

DEP should be conducting another, equally important assessment – an assessment of expected trends in water and fertilizer use and how these trends will affect its strategy for springs restoration. We know that Florida's population will increase dramatically over the 20-year period of springs funding. We have also seen projections from various State agencies indicating that agricultural water use, and therefore agricultural fertilizer use, will increase significantly in springs country over the next 20 years. So how do we know that the \$1 billion in springs funding will improve springs, let alone even make up for the added impairment contributed by future growth? An analysis of this sort is desperately needed if the \$1 billion in springs funding is to have any impact.

Ultimately, as much as FSC welcomes funding for springs restoration, we should be mindful that the goal of springs funding, the 2016 water bill, and many other ongoing efforts is springs restoration. This means that projects shouldn't only be compared to each other to determine which one has a better water-per-dollar or nitrogen-per-dollar ratio. They should be compared with other policy options which are likely to be far more effective in the long run in restoring springs. These alternative options include many sensible conservation measures that the State has been loath to consider, such as dialing back existing consumptive use permits, charging moderate fees for water use, or mandating fertilizer restrictions in areas with unconfined soils. FSC is still concerned that the State's political leaders are unwilling to embrace the more substantive changes that will be necessary if Florida's springs are ever going to be restored to health.

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