

Groundwater levels continue to plummet

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Wells running dry

By Mark Scohier, Staff writer

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While scientists, policy makers and stakeholders alike disagree on how to address the issue of Florida's water, one thing is certain: It continues to become less available.

Drought is part of the problem. The Suwannee River Water Management District, which manages 14 counties in Northern Florida, reports an overall rainfall deficit of about 16 inches for the last year, which, from April to March, has been the "driest April March period since 1932."

Florida is known to undergo periods of drought every few years. Still, data from both SRWMD and the Florida Geological Society, taking drought years into account, shows groundwater levels in the area trending downward since the middle of the 20th Century, suggesting increased withdrawal is having an affect.

"We're mining the aquifer," said Chiefland resident and Save Our Suwannee Inc. representative Annette Long in an interview at Fanning Springs State Park Friday. "We're taking more than is being recharged. One-hundred percent of the data shows that's what's happening."

It was at Fanning Springs Aug. 9 where Long, a veteran cave diver and springs advocate, captured on video a steady influx of brown river water flowing into the spring. "I said, 'I think I'm going to have a stroke. I need to sit down,'" Long said. "The smallest rise or fall now causes the springs to reverse."

At about 50 cubic feet of water per second, both Fanning and Manatee springs are at about half the flow that typically categorized them as first magnitude springs. Fanning's decline, according to SRWMD records, has been slow and steady during the last year, while Manatee has seen a sharp decline from more than 150 cubic feet per second a year ago.

Levy County representatives reported recently that Bronson Blue Springs has ceased flowing, and representatives from two of Williston's most popular attractions, Blue Grotto and Devil's Den, also report record low levels.

Dan Fisher, who has worked at Blue Grotto for about 14 years, said he's never seen the spring's level so low. "The water is dropping like a rock," he said Friday. "It's probably a good 10 feet down from the average," which, according to Fisher, measures at about 100 feet at its deepest point on average. He said he's noticed levels dropping for the last two years.

Fisher said the lack of rain is certainly an issue, but agriculture and development also play a part, both of which, unlike rain, can be managed.

"Florida is just totally being destroyed," he said. "The economy is the only thing anybody cares about anymore. Gotta' make money. But once you destroy everything that everybody came here for, what's left?"

Rowena Thomas, who co-manages Devil's Den, said Friday the spring is down about 12 feet from its average of about 60 feet.

"Residents are concerned," she said. "I would be too if I had wells. If you're not concerned about it, you're putting your head in the sand."

Seventy-one wells reported record low levels for March, according to SRWMD.

Jamie Storey, owner of Action Pump Repair and Well Drilling in Old Town, said he's seen a lot of wells go dry in the last year.

"A lot of the 30 to 40 foot wells are drying up right now," he said. "A lot of them are starting to pump air and sand."

He said a lot of wells went dry during the drought in the early 2000s, as well, though most of those were shallower wells, extending on average only about 20 feet into the ground. From that time, he said, water levels have continued to drop. Storey said most of the wells he's seen run dry recently are in the Dixie County area. People have had to extend wells to get their pumps farther down, sometimes having to purchase a more powerful pump.

Jody Stephenson, owner of Stephenson Septic Tank Services Inc., of Old Town, said he contracts out a lot of well drilling and pump repair and is running in to the same problems.

"There are a lot of wells going dry. Mostly in Dixie County. But it's all around, Levy and Gilchrist. Everybody's in the same boat," he said last week. The problem, which started about two years ago, has gotten worse in the last year, he said.

Steve Quinata, owner of Williston Well and Pump Inc., said he's been seeing wells run dry in Morriston, Williston and in areas closer to Gainesville. He said the problem became most apparent at the beginning of the year.

Still, SRWMD board members continue to issue permits for millions of gallons of water withdrawals a day. On April 10, the board approved for a third time temporary permits initially approved in December for about 3.9 million gallons of water a day to three farms operating in the Lower Suwannee River Basin wishing to expand operations. The William Douberly Farm, Alliance Grazing Group (Lancala) and its sister operation, Piedmont Dairy Farm, are in total permitted to use about 6.3 million gallons of water a day. Combined, the farms will be using 15 new spray pivots for irrigation purposes, according to SRWMD records.

Long said she thinks people would be shocked to know that taxpayers eat the lion's share of the cost of such pivots when farmers expand operations.

"We are out of water, and the feds and the state are helping farmers get 80 percent cost share for circle pivots for new land. That is insane!" she said.

John Sage Sr., who lives between Fowlers Bluff and Chiefland, complained last week about the installation of new pivots on farms near his home.

"It's OK if there's plenty of water," he said. "But I don't see me or anyone else, just regular people, losing their wells."

Sage, who has lived in the area for 25 years, said he's never seen the water situation so bad. He said he does his part to conserve water, something SRWMD asks residents to do, but he is losing his garden, and he's starting to see a lot of iron in his water. He said he's not sure if he can afford the \$3,500 it would cost him to increase the size of the pipe his well uses. If he could address the water district, he said, "I'd ask them to curtail water use. These guys use enough water for a small city."

And that's another problem, Long said. The district doesn't actually know how much water farmers are using because the vast majority of agricultural wells are not monitored.

"My theory is that they're using a whole lot more water than they are permitted for," Long, who has been attending SRWMD meetings regularly for several years, said. Why else would a farm lobbyist tell SRWMD board members at the December meeting that monitoring agricultural wells would put farmers out of business, she asked?

"I'm not asking them to lose business," she said. "But they're asking us to have a crisis."

Several state agencies are currently working toward sharing resources and coming up with a single model to help determine what happens to the groundwater in North Florida, but Long said an accurate understanding of what's going on depends on agricultural wells being monitored. Meanwhile, she said, water districts use outdated groundwater models for permitting purposes.

"The model shows we're not supposed to be running out of water yet. This was way down the road. That's why I was so shocked: because it's happening."

When enough springs quit flowing, she said, parts of the aquifer will be inundated with river water. River water has high dissolved oxygen levels that can spur the quick release of salts such as gypsum, sulphur and arsenic found naturally in Florida's geology.

"There will come a point when the water will poison the crops."



Mark Schier

Ten-year-old Abby Wiebking, of North Carolina, descends the staircase into Devil's Den in Williston April 11. The spring is down about 12 feet from its average depth of about 60 feet.

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1 of 2



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