RiverFronts

SUWANNEE RIVER WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

September 2011

Senators paddle river to learn about resource protection

Florida Senate President Mike Haridopolos, Senator Steve Oelrich, and their legislative aides took a river trip with officials from the Suwannee River Water Management District (District) on August 23 to learn about the challenges the District faces in protecting water resources.

The group met at Poe Springs Park in Alachua County and paddled down a small portion of the Santa Fe River. In addition to Poe Springs, they observed several riverside springs along the way.

After the tour, District Executive Director David Still and District Governing Board Chair Donald Quincey gave a presentation on springs protection, water supply planning, and minimum flows and levels.

SRWMD scientists study shoals to set MFLs

IN SEARCH OF SHOALS

While the ongoing drought has taken a toll on water resources, it also has provided a window of opportunity for the District to more easily collect vital information that will protect resources in the future.

With that in mind, a team of District scientists on August 16 boarded boats and set out on the Middle Suwannee River in search of shoals.

Shoals are shallow areas created by obstructions, usually from the presence of rock in most rivers in our District. These areas naturally restrict water. Many result in river rapids.

The crew covered a 13-14 mile stretch of the river from the Suwannee River State Park to Dowling Park. With the help of global positioning system (GPS) units, geographic information system (GIS) software, and computer laptops, they mapped the location of six shoals.

During the next project phase, the District will collect further data by surveying select shoals and examining various features at the shoals, including the type of river bottom, vegetation, and habitat for various aquatic species. They will also collect water flow, water elevation, and floodplain biological data as part of the process.

WHAT ARE MFLS?

Mapping shoals is preliminary work needed to establish minimum flows and levels (MFLs).

MFLs help ensure our water supplies are sustained and our natural systems are protected. MFLs tell us how much water is available for "reasonable-beneficial uses" and how much water is needed for our ecosystem to remain healthy. This data provides criteria that are used in the permitting process and in water supply planning.

The District is statutorily required to establish MFLs under Chapter 373, Florida Statutes. The District is currently developing MFLs for the Lower Santa Fe River, Ichetucknee River, and White Springs. MFLs on the Middle Suwannee River and related springs will be set at a later date.

LAND OWNER COOPERATION

The process to set MFLs involves surveying and other data collection methods within river beds and adjacent floodplains. Some data sites may be too distant from a boat ramp to enable efficient access to the shore line from the river. Therefore, it may be necessary for the District to enter private property to set up survey or other equipment to evaluate the river channel or floodplain.

From time to time, it may be necessary for District staff and contractors to access private property in order to collect data for its MFLs program. Whenever possible, the District will collect data on public lands. However, when working on private property is unavoidable, the District obtains permission from land owners before stepping on private property.

Board member tours Monticello's reclaimed water facilities

District Governing Board member Dr. George Cole met with Monticello City Manager Steve Wingate on Sept. 6 to learn about the City's reuse program and to tour the facilities associated with the project. The two visited the City's wastewater treatment plant, the City's wet weather storage pond, and a local plant nursery.

Through a grant provided by the District, as well as funds from other public agencies, the City was able to upgrade its treatment plant to produce reclaimed water to be used for irrigation at Simpson Nurseries in Monticello. Piping and pump stations send the reclaimed water to the nursery where it is stored in two ponds and tapped for irrigation.

The reclaimed water system also includes a wet weather storage pond to hold excess water.

SRWMD Board member Dr. George Cole, left, and Monticello City Manager Steve Wingate observe the City's wet weather storage pond.

Through the use of reclaimed water, the nursery is currently reducing its groundwater consumption by about 350,000 gallons each day and saving about $14,000 in electrical costs. The nursery saves additional groundwater with innovative conservation practices that capture and reuse storm water and irrigation runoff. This practice results in additional groundwater savings by recovering and using the reclaimed water more than once.

Prior to the City's implementation of the project, wastewater discharged to a series of wetlands and then to a tributary of the Aucilla River. By sending the reclaimed water to the nursery, the City is conserving groundwater, making the best use of highly treated wastewater, and saving about $20,000 per year in maintenance costs and about $25,000 per year in electrical costs spent on the old system.

Reclaimed or reuse water can be made available to customers for irrigation, toilet flushing, clothes washing, and other non-potable uses. The District works with wastewater utilities in its 15-county region to develop the capacity to produce reclaimed water to offset groundwater consumption.

News briefs

FY 2011-12 Budget

The District's Governing Board passed a tentative budget of $47,389,589 and a proposed millage rate of 0.4143 at its first public hearing Sept. 13. The tentative budget represents a 16 percent reduction over last year's budget and the tentative millage rate reflects a 6 percent reduction over last year's millage rate.

The final budget and millage rate will be adopted at a second hearing on Sept. 27 at 5:30 p.m. It will be held at the District's headquarters in Live Oak at the corner of U.S. 90 and CR 49. The public is invited and encouraged to attend. For more information, call 800.226.1066 (FL only) or 386.362.1001.

Hydrologic Conditions

The District received below normal rainfall in August, with an average of 5.59 inches District-wide. This increased the 12-month deficit to 11.7 inches – the highest deficit since February 2008.

Deficits nearing 25 inches persisted in the upper Suwannee and Santa Fe basins. Groundwater levels fell in more than 50 percent of the wells the District monitors, with record monthly lows occurring at 21 wells and historic lows at seven wells.

The District continues to experience drought conditions and a Water Shortage Advisory remains in effect, which calls for all water users to voluntarily eliminate non-essential uses of water.

Groundwater Model

The Suwannee River and St. Johns River water management districts are jointly developing the next generation North Florida Regional Groundwater Flow Model. The model will cover numerous counties in North Florida and South Georgia to better predict and assess potential water resource impacts.

The districts will hold a series of public meetings to discuss the development of the model and welcome input from the public. As meeting dates and locations become available, they will be posted on the District's calendar at www.mysuwanneeriver.com. For more information, call 386.362.1001.

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Please register on our website to receive notification of each issue at www.mysuwanneeriver.com.

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