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SUWANNEE RIVER

THREAT: Excessive groundwater withdrawals; agricultural and sewage pollution

STATES: Florida, Georgia

SUMMARY

The Suwannee River is famous for its springs, which ensure a consistent flow of clear, clean water. The river's flow nurtures fish and wildlife and provides world-class recreation opportunities. But pollution and excessive water withdrawals are contaminating the river and causing vital springs to dry up. The Florida legislature and the state's Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) must allocate funds to protect the springs and enforce pollution limits.

THE RIVER

The Suwannee River meanders from its headwaters in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia south through Florida, eventually emptying into the ocean. It is free flowing for all of its nearly 250 miles and drains a watershed of more than 11,000 square miles. For thousands of years, people have been drawn to the river to enjoy its waters and reap the abundance of its fisheries. The primary source of the river's flow is more than 300 freshwater springs, delivering groundwater from the Floridian Aquifer. There are seven springs along the Suwannee River that have been designated by the state of Florida as Outstanding Florida Springs due to their importance to the ecosystem. The watershed around the river supports numerous communities, including Live Oak, Chiefland, and Fanning Springs. The Suwannee River Basin supports multiple industries, including agriculture, phosphate mining, bottled water, and tourism. State and federal protected areas include the Lower Suwannee Wildlife Refuge, Suwannee River State Park, Manatee Springs State Park, and the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail. Recreational opportunities include world-class cave diving sites.

THE THREAT

The Suwannee River is designated as an Outstanding Florida Water, and seven springs that supply fresh groundwater to the Suwannee are designated Outstanding Florida Springs. These designations mean that the Suwannee River and these springs have the highest levels of protection in Florida. Ongoing monitoring and research on the health of the river and its springs indicate substantial impairments that are intended to be prevented by these safeguards. This includes excessive levels of nitrate pollution that not only create toxic algae outbreaks, but also increase the risks of cancer and birth defects. Pollution is also creating low dissolved oxygen that suffocates fish and other aquatic organisms. In addition,

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excessive groundwater withdrawals have caused critical springs to go dry. The FDEP set limits for the Minimum Flows and Levels in 2008, and a Total Maximum Daily Load with a Basin Management Action Plan in 2018 to meet the requirements of the 2016 Florida Springs and Aquifer Protection Act. But without enforcement, the problems persist: The Suwannee and its tributaries continue to suffer from regular algal outbreaks due to rising pollution. And unmanaged groundwater pumping through the watershed is causing springs to fail, impacting the river's flow and overall health.

The biggest sources of pollution in the Suwannee River Basin are fertilizer and livestock waste. Recent research has shown that dairy farms near the river system add 2.1 million pounds of nitrogen pollution per year. In addition, poorly maintained and managed sewer systems in communities on the Suwannee and its tributaries are regularly failing, dumping raw sewage into the river. These levels of pollution are above the limit of .35 mg/L nitrate-nitrogen that the FDEP set to protect springs and the integrity of the river. Springs within state parks along the Suwannee River are currently measuring 5.0-6.0 mg/L. These pollution problems are exacerbated by groundwater pumping, pushing this river system to its limit.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Suwannee River can still be the asset to communities in Florida and Georgia that everyone needs it to be. There are two key actions that must be taken to improve the Suwannee:

First, the state of Florida has a responsibility to ensure that there is clean water for the Suwannee River and springs. The restoration and protection of the springs and their rivers have been overlooked by the state, which has only invested the absolute minimum. The leadership of Florida must allocate \$250 million in the 2027-28 state budget for the Springs and Watershed Restoration Program in the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Second, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection must enforce the Suwannee River Basin Management Action Plan to comply with the state's nitrogen pollution load reduction target. This includes holding the responsible entities for nitrogen pollution accountable, including agricultural operations, concentrated animal feeding operations, and counties and cities, for their wastewater treatment plans. The state can no longer turn a blind eye to the pollution going into the waters of the state.