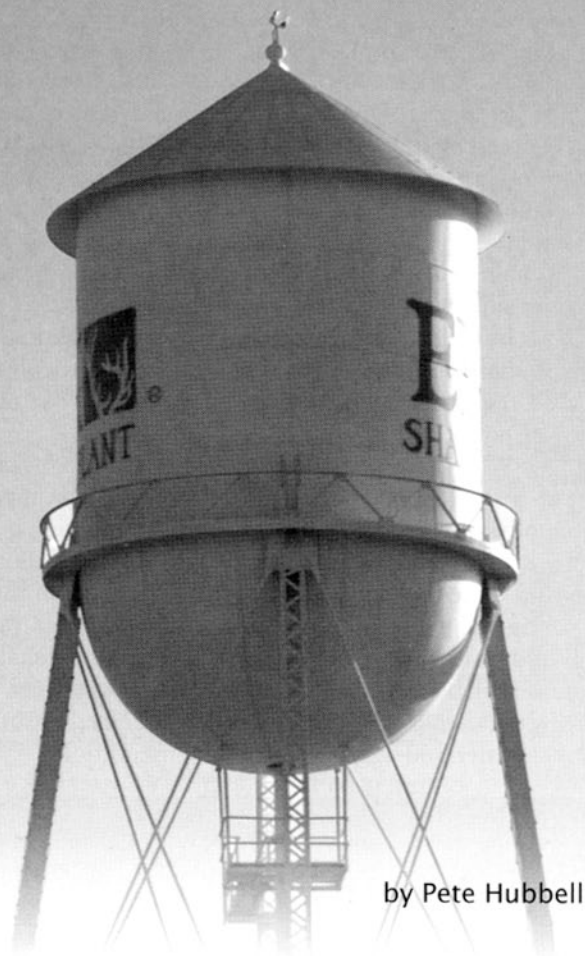


Quenching Florida's Insatiable Thirst: Are You Prepared?



by Pete Hubbell

It was the shot heard 'round the state – the boldest salvo fired yet in the battle over water, pitting north against south, water-rich against water-poor. This much is certain: When the Florida Council of 100 released its recommendations on improving Florida's water supply flow in 2003, it got everyone talking.

For local officials, it was a sobering wakeup call. The specter of rerouting water from North to South Florida so growth there could continue unabated meant water issues no longer could be ignored.

For the Suwannee River region – singled out as a promising water source for fast-growing Central and South Florida, and referred to in one speech as the “Saudi Arabia of water” – it was a call to action.

But the sheiks weren't dealing. Instead, the Suwannee River Water Management District mobilized to protect its liquid assets by getting down to the business of long-term water-supply planning. That entailed a comprehensive look at all potential water demands for the next 25 and 50 years, as well as an aggressive program to identify minimum flows and levels (MFLs) needed to maintain the ecological health of the region's water resources.

Clearly, Florida had reached a turning point in the politics of water, according to writer Cynthia Barnett, author

of *Florida Trend* magazine's August 2005 cover report, “Unfiltered: The Truth About Water in Florida.”

“After spending 150 years draining land to get rid of water, developers now were desperate to make sure there was enough of it,” Barnett wrote. “Water supply – until then the passion and purview of environmentalists, farmers and the state's vast water bureaucracy – now was a business issue.”

What's more, the era of cheap water is over.

For cities, counties and regions that were caught in the crossfire, there are several important lessons. A number of factors have made local water supply more difficult to gauge and protect, increasing the need for development of alternative water sources and a much longer planning horizon:

- State requirements for MFLs, designed to protect area rivers from significant ecological harm, are limiting the water available for withdrawal.
- Water management districts are granting longer-term permits, enabling permittees to “lock up” available ground and surface waters for extended periods.
- Competition for the last “cheap” water supplies from traditional sources such as groundwater is fierce, spilling across county and regional lines.

One needn't look far for evidence of brewing water conflicts:

- In Central Florida, Orange County has requested an additional 89 million gallons of groundwater per day to accommodate new growth, reports the *St. Petersburg Times*. Neighboring Lake, Seminole, Osceola and Polk counties, as well as the South Florida Water Management District, are challenging the request because it threatens their own water-supply development.

- In Tampa, officials eager to withdraw additional water from the Hillsborough River are finding it difficult to meet MFL requirements needed to safeguard the health of the lower portion of the river.

- When Miami-Dade County asked state officials last year to review plans for approximately a dozen new developments – entailing an additional 100 million gallons a day for 20 years over its existing 346-million-gallon-a-day ration – the county received a stern rebuff from the water management district. Additional groundwater pumping would harm the Everglades, said district officials, who advised the county to consider alternative sources such as seawater desalination, surface water, increased use of treated wastewater and aggressive water conservation.

Such conflicts recall the Tampa Bay water wars of the 1980s and '90s. Back then, battles over water erupted into lawsuits that cost taxpayers millions of dollars. Excessive groundwater pumping drained lakes and wetlands and shrunk rivers by reducing base flows. The standoff finally was resolved when utilities agreed to groundwater cutbacks in exchange for water-management funding to develop alternative water supplies.

Partly in response to recommendations by the Council of 100, the Florida Chamber of Commerce formed a Water Task Force to assess water-supply development and sustainability. The task force urged long-range planning, regional solutions to water-supply development and new funding for water-supply projects. Many of these recommendations became part of Senate Bill 444, the comprehensive water-supply development legislation that was passed in 2005.

The Water Protection and Sustainability Act stepped up the requirements for water-supply development, earmarking \$100 million for new projects. Much of the credit goes to state Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, for working to bring diverse interests to consensus. The legislation gives priority to projects in which communities and water managers work together for the regional good.



However, the law's greatest legacy may be a sea change in thinking. No longer can we regard the product of wastewater treatment plants and stormwater ditches as waste to be discarded. In fact, these are Florida's best sources for additional water. Treated wastewater can be used for sprinkling lawns and irrigating groves and pastures. Stormwater, meanwhile, can be captured and stored in wet seasons to bolster drinking supplies in dry periods instead of being allowed to run off into lakes and estuaries, where it causes pollution.

Slaking Florida's insatiable thirst will require careful planning – starting now. Already the fourth most populous state, Florida is expected to grow 21 percent over the next decade, exceeding 21 million people and bypassing New York to become the third most populous state behind California and Texas. By the year 2020, demand for water is projected to reach 9.3 billion gallons a day, a billion gallons more than now.

Where will your water come from, and how can you ensure an adequate supply?

1. Plan ahead. Develop a long-term water-supply plan that forecasts future water demands. While 10- to 15-year planning horizons may be common, they aren't sufficient. (Keep in mind that it takes five to 10 years to bring a new water supply online.) Counties and municipalities should be developing 20-year plans and considering 50-year demand projections. Remember, if you're not planning ahead, somebody else may have designs on your water supply.

2. Participate in the establishment of minimum flows and levels through your water management district. These limits will affect your ability to develop future water supplies.

3. Think regionally. Regional water-supply development typically fosters projects that are far more cost-effective, environmentally sound and politically saleable. In addition, cooperative projects are more likely to land funding assistance.

4. Reduce demand. Aggressively expand conservation and projects utilizing reclaimed wastewater and stormwater.

5. Consider alternative sources a piece of the local "water-supply pie." By diversifying sources, you will be better protected against catastrophic events such as droughts and hazardous spills.

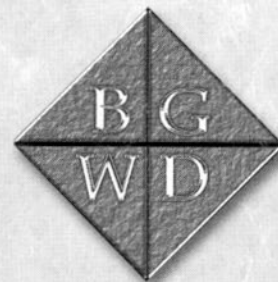
Solving Florida's water woes won't be easy. The stakes are high and the clock is ticking. But communities armed with a sound water-supply plan will have a strong foundation for the future.

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Resources

- **Senate Bill 444:** http://election.dos.state.fl.us/laws/05laws/ch_2005-291.pdf
- **"Unfiltered: The Truth About Water in Florida"** by Cynthia Barnett, *Florida Trend*, August 2005. For an online version of the cover story, visit www.floridatrend.com. In the search field, enter "Unfiltered" and issue date: August 2005 issue. Visitors must register to read *Florida Trend* online, but registration is free.

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