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October 31, 2024

Ms. Pam Flores
Environmental Administrator
Office of Water Policy and Ecosystem Restoration
401 E. University Avenue
Gainesville, Florida 32601
Pamela.Flores@FloridaDEP.gov

Dear Ms. Flores,

Our company, Heartland Agro – U.S. LLC, currently operates a stevia farm in Archer, Florida located within the Suwannee River Water Management District. The department’s proposed rule, Rule 62-42.300 entitled “Minimum Flows and Levels and Recovery and Prevention Strategies,” would alter the previously-adopted and approved minimum flows for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers and Priority Springs, to the detriment of our current operation.

The proposed rule changes if adopted in their current form would severely and adversely affect our ability, as well as other local farms, to continue the historical agricultural use of the property. The proposed reduction in minimum flows regulation drastically reduces the amount of water our farm can use to grow crops to the point where agricultural operations may cease.

To illustrate, water reduction estimates for Whistling Pines Ranch, another Archer-based farm, could be as much as 81% and 86% for its two properties. These proposed reductions amount to approximately just two (2) weeks of pivot irrigation which is remarkably insufficient to grow the farm’s corn.

Our company is new to the State of Florida and we established our location and business plan to grow our stevia on the consumptive use permit we were initially acquiring and ultimately granted. Our agricultural endeavors in Archer help create jobs for the local community that could be lost should the department forge ahead with the proposed draft rule.

Heartland respectfully requests that the department and the Suwannee River Water Management District maintain the current permitted minimum flows and levels to allow existing farms to continue agricultural use of their respective properties.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Matthew Lees", followed by a horizontal line.

Matthew Lees
Associate General Counsel
Heartland Food Products Group

CC: OWP_rulemaking@floridadep.gov