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Colquitt, Georgia
39837

October 9, 2024

Flores
Office of Water Policy & Ecosystems Restoration
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
3900 Commonwealth Ave
Tallahassee FL, 32399

Subject: Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee River MFL Recovery Strategy – Public Comment

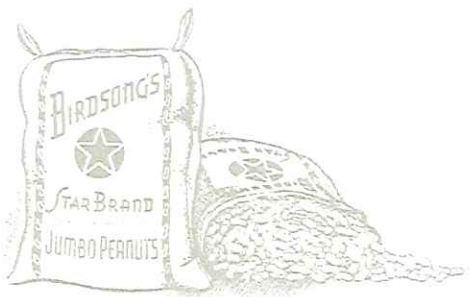
Mrs. Flores,

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD), and St. John's River Water Management District (SJRWMD) should reconsider the constraints being proposed for agricultural water users in the Draft Regulatory Strategy that was presented at the July 31, 2024 workshop for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee River MFL Recovery Strategy. As a water user in the Suwannee River Basin, we have been told these rules will likely be used in the upcoming Suwannee River MFL and we are very concerned for the impacts they have on agricultural users in North Florida. The rules, as drafted, have the potential to force agricultural water users out of business, devalue property, and disrupt the economy of Florida.

Under the draft recovery strategy an agricultural water user would need to reduce on farm water use by 32% to comply with the recovery requirements on the Ichetucknee River. If water use reductions are similar on the Suwannee River, there will not be enough water to obtain a decent yield, which would result in income loss and over time force us out of business. We would be operating at a financial deficit before any additional inputs (fertilizer, pesticides, herbicides, fuel, etc.) are considered. Switching commodities to lower intensity crops would flood the market, bringing every commodity price down with it.

We understand there are projects under development, but without more information on these projects and how producers in these areas are able to participate in these projects, we can only assume the cost is significant based on the types of project ideas that have been discussed. Obtaining land with active water use permits around the Suwannee River large enough to offset this type of impact would cost approximately \$10,000/acre.

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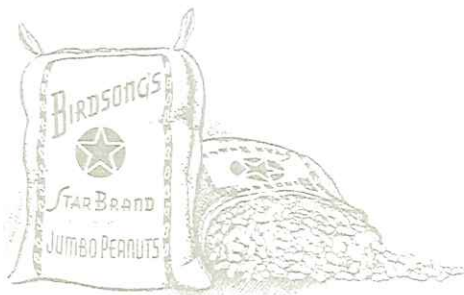
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However, once the water use is retired, that land would only be valued at approximately \$4,000/acre. We do not understand how anyone could financially survive with that type of investment strategy. Agricultural users cannot simply recoup costs associated with retiring existing water uses or buying into regional projects, as we have no control over most of the commodity pricing.

The draft recovery strategy seems to hold water users with an individual permit to a higher standard than those who can operate under a general permit by rule. Water users who's 2014-2018 average impact is above 0.01 cfs must submit an offset plan but 0.01 cfs is equivalent to less than 10,000 gallons per day at the compliance gauge. Someone using water under a general permit could have an impact of more than 0.01 cfs and would not have to submit an offset plan. These users are presumably being offset by regional projects without the need for them to adjust their onsite water use any. In addition, if water use has increased since 2018 the requirement is to offset 100% of the impacts from that increased water use. If a permittee with a general permit by rule has increased their water use they currently have no responsibility to offset that increase and again, would presumably be covered under regional projects developed by FDEP and the WMDs.

Additionally, there is no burden being placed on the water uses out of state that also impact these waterbodies. We understand that the State of Florida has no authority to regulate these users or require Georgia to participate in recovering these systems which leaves Florida taxpayers ultimately providing the funding required for projects to offset impacts from Georgia. It is unfair to significantly increase the regulatory cost for Florida water users who are following state regulations and paying taxes. If the state plans to offset Georgia's share of the impact which is largely due to agriculture, the state should also commit to offsetting the impacts from Florida's agriculture as well.

The agricultural community are responsible stewards of water resources, implementing the most water and nutrient conservative technologies as soon as they become available. We rely on the environment to make a living, and our interest is sustainability and overall environmental protection. We are not arguing against protecting our rivers, but we know that agriculture in North Florida will not survive unless there is assistance from the FDEP and WMDs to reduce the financial burden of these proposed regulations. We urge you to revise the draft regulatory strategy such that agricultural water use offsets are met by regional projects at no cost to producers. We feel it is in the best interest of the state to do so because of the volatility in the agricultural market that already exists without these increased regulations.



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We have done our best at expressing our concerns in a simple comment letter but feel it is important to meet and further discuss these implications. As more information becomes available and we work to understand the full weight of these impacts, we may submit additional comments.

Regards,

Gerald Garland, Operating Manager
Lee Peanut Farms, LLC
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