

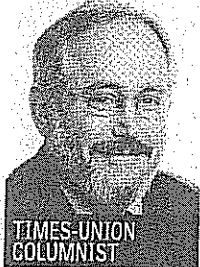
VIEWPOINT

Protecting precious water requires everyone's help

A recent report by a state Senate committee pointed out the obvious: Florida's rivers, lakes, springs and water supply are in trouble.

The reason is simple. The state's population has doubled since 1980 and is projected to double again in another 40 years.

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The state's environment simply can't handle that many people and remain healthy.

The results are waterways that are polluted and dwindling water supplies.

This is just one example of the degradation listed in the report by the Florida Senate Select Committee on Florida's Inland Waters released last week:

"Silver Springs, so named for the silvery sand once clearly visible through the clear blue water, is becoming choked with green algae that covers most of the eel grass and other submerged plant life."

The report just as easily could have described the St. Johns River turning green because of algal blooms fed by an overload of nutrients.

What can prevent things from getting worse as more and more people pile into Florida?

The committee's report echoes recommendations made by the state's water managers: aggressive water conservation, more reuse of treated wastewater, development of alternative water supplies.

Included in that last option is taking hundreds of millions of gallons of water a day out of the state's waterways to meet the demand of more growth, possibly putting the health of those waterways in peril.

While we in North Florida have been critical of Central Florida's plan to rely on the St. Johns for its water supply, it turns out that utilities here may turn to Black Creek and the St. Marys River for water.

The St. Johns River Water Management District assures that protecting the environment will be the top priority in developing alternative water supplies.

That's not a lot of comfort since the state's water management districts and the Department of Environmental Protection were supposed to be protecting the environment while the mess we're in was allowed to happen.

Clearly the best course of action is conservation, including better reuse of treated wastewater for such things as irrigating golf courses, which, according to figures provided by the St. Johns River Water Management District, used 49 millions gallons of ground water and surface water a day in 2008 in the district's 18 counties.

Agriculture is another big user, with 332 million gallons a day for irrigation. Better methods, such as drip irrigation, would reduce that.

Another major user is all of us.

Water efficient appliances would cut that use down. So would cisterns designed to capture rainwater. And we could stop pouring 50 percent of the water taken from the Floridan aquifer onto landscaping.

Just like the Senate committee report, water management district officials are preaching conservation these days.

However, they say that won't be enough to meet the demand for water that will come with growth so the idea of taking water from sources like the St. Johns River will have to come into play. With concerted effort, they can be proved wrong.

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DOONESBURY FLASHBACK By Garry Trudeau

