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Ogeechee Riverkeeper: People, animals, agriculture—not industry—should be prioritized for aquifer

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Ogeechee Riverkeeper is in waders taking samples, working with residents, digging through data, and protecting our watershed every single day – to ensure clean water is abundant and available hundreds of years from now. We don't think we should wait and hope it is; nor should we take the word of those who will gain from the project that they will take care of it eventually. Our area is fortunate to be able to draw on the Floridan Aquifer, which holds pristine water suitable for drinking. ORK, and others, contend this water should be prioritized for people, animals, and agriculture – not industrial uses.

We are still living with the consequences of past groundwater excessive use. Decades of overuse by a few big industries created a “cone of depression” in the aquifer, reducing 40 feet of upward pressure to a 120-foot-sink, leading to lower water levels and saltwater intrusion into the freshwater aquifer. As a result, Chatham, Bryan, Liberty, and parts of Effingham counties have faced withdrawal restrictions since 2006 to slow down this saltwater intrusion. Groundwater harm reduction efforts are far from complete. These counties will be required to further reduce their current levels of groundwater withdrawals next year. Even with these efforts, groundwater levels have only recovered 40 feet – still a net loss of 120 feet. All this was in response to short-term economic gain at the price of a shared, public resource.

To avoid leaving our future generations with an even worse situation, our region must have a concrete and concerted water supply plan. Ahead of a new wave of thirsty growth, our already-strained water supplies will be stretched even more. We have gathered all the applications, maps, permits, documents, images, timeline, news, data, and more for the public to view at ogeecheeriverkeeper.org/megasite.

Moving too quickly to grab at economic opportunities is not an excuse for endangering people's access to clean water. If our leaders continue the current case-by-case approach, industries, businesses, and enormous housing developments will scramble to get dwindling supplies, potentially cutting corners along the way. And the result will be death by a thousand straws stuck into a strained supply of water.

The citizens of our region should not be drinking treated river water while industries monopolize the pristine water from our aquifer for profit. Farmers should not have to worry about their wells going dry while working to provide food for our country. The history and status quo of Floridan Aquifer overuse cannot continue. This shared resource must be better protected for future generations of Georgia citizens.

It is up to local, municipal, and state leaders - elected and appointed - to decide whether this growth will be a short-term boom with long-term impacts on the region and its residents, or if it will be the catalyst for ensuring stability for generations of Coastal Georgians.

Poor water planning does not justify bad water policy. The promise of potential benefits is not a reason to sacrifice what we already have, and what will only become more precious in the coming years.