

Citizens group launches study to learn why Lower Withlacoochee River appears to be dying

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The Lower Withlacoochee River flows past hundreds of homes in Inglis and Yankeetown and through thickly forested banks on its 6-7 mile journey from Lake Rousseau to the Gulf of Mexico, but a citizens group says the river has suffered a major collapse in recent years and is on the brink of being biologically dead.

Withlacoochee Aquatic Restoration (WAR) has hired a private company, Wetlands Solutions, Inc. of Gainesville to study the river for two years with assistance from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Members of WAR will draw monthly water and sediment samples for DEP to analyze and hopefully determine what is killing the Lower Withlacoochee River.

Dan Hilliard, a former Vietnam helicopter pilot and retired air traffic controller who lives on a scenic canal connected to the Lower Withlacoochee said several years ago “things started disappearing” from his canal and from the river. The canal below his home once supported a family of otters. They are gone. Bass would bed in the canal below his home. They are gone. Tarpon were a common sight in the river. No more.

Hilliard, a member of WAR, said blue crabs were once plentiful in the river and the canal, but they have vanished. He said small fiddler crabs remain. Gar fish were once abundant, but no longer. He said a few years ago after a big die off of Gar fish resident Jack Schofield collected dead gar and sent them to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission for analysis. The only thing found was algae in the gills of the fish. Analysis of the fish was inconclusive.

“The term I use is the river is dead,” said Hilliard. “There has been a collapse of biological activity. That will hopefully be borne out by the study. The river’s not dead-dead, but what your seeing is a river that is a shadow of its past. Nobody’s fishing on the river anymore because there’s nothing here.”

The first phase of the Lower Withlacoochee River Environmental Assessment was to catalogue the existing state data base which included a detailed assessment of septic tanks along the river. Data shows dissolved oxygen levels in the river vary. When oxygen levels are low fish kills result. High levels of mercury in the river are a problem. But there is no long term scientific data.

In the second phase of the study, WAR had originally planned to collect sediment at five stations four times a year along with water samples. The estimated cost of study was \$234,000. That was hard to swallow. But the estimated cost of the study has been reduced to roughly \$60,000 with the addition of DEP to analyze water and sediment samples.

DEP's entry into the picture resulted from from WAR member Phil Sprinkle being familiar with a coastal aquatic management team working in the area. Hilliard followed Sprinkle's lead and contacted Julie Espy with DEP. After two lengthy phone conferences between DEP, WAR and Wetlands Solutions, Inc. DEP signed off on analyzing monthly water samples collected by WAR.

Hilliard said the cost of the study could be a little higher or lower than \$60,000. WAR has filed an application for funding with the RESTORE Act Committee for Levy County. The RESTORE Act was passed by Congress in response to the April 20, 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in the northern Gulf of Mexico. Eighty percent of the penalties collected will go to five Gulf States including Florida, with 35 percent going directly to counties and 30 percent to a consortium of counties. WAR's application for funding is one of many pending before the RESTORE Act committee and Levy County Commission.

The Lower Withlacoochee River is the product of a failed federal economic project known as the Cross Florida Barge Canal. The canal bisected the Withlachoochee River at the Inglis Dam. The river was then directed to a bypass canal and flow through a small dam that dumps water into what became known as the Lower Withlacoochee River. Construction of the barge canal was halted in 1971, seven years after construction began when environmental groups sued on grounds that it would severely degrade the environment. The canal was designed as a waterway connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean.

Hilliard said construction of the bypass canal slowed the flow of the river and prevented it from scouring the bottom. As a result, the river collects sediment on its floor. But whether the lack of river flow is part of the problem with the Lower Withlacoochee is another scientific mystery that has yet to be resolved.

Hilliard said he and other WAR members have their suspicions about the continued use of Herbicides in Lake Rousseau, the sole source of water for the Lower Withlacoochee. Lake Rousseau is a backwater formed more than 100 years ago when the Inglis Dam was constructed by a power company to produce electricity. The stump-laden, 4000 acre lake has been heavily sprayed with herbicides for many years to control weeds that block boat channels.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2014 applied six different brands of herbicide in the lake including 18,548 pounds of Aquathol K, according to its online records. That same year FWC applied 34.55 pounds of Clipper, 8.39 pounds of Reward, 670 pounds of Tribune, 94.92 pounds of Roundup Custom and 2.03 pounds of Aquaneat.

Hilliard suspects that some of the residual herbicide flows from Lake Rousseau to the Lower Withlacoochee River and causes an impact on the lower river, but he says he has no scientific proof other than the lack of fish in the river and the fact that eel grass, a native species, has declined a great deal.

"Hopefully this study is going to give us the answers we're looking for," Hilliard said. "We want credibility in using scientific protocols. DEP has significant credibility in that regard."

John Fuchs, a member of WAR and a longtime resident on the Lower Withlacoochee believes that the herbicide treatments are damaging the river.

He points to the massive die off of mussels in the river in 2007.

"People who have lived here a long time say it's not the same river," Fuchs said.

Hilliard is interested in the way Rodman Dam is managed. The state uses drawdowns to control weed growth in Rodman, and Hilliard said the fishing is much better there. FWC records indicate 339.43 pounds of the herbicide Tribune were used in 2014.

Hilliard says his information is that Lake Rousseau has been drawn down only once in the last 100 years.

He wonders if drawdowns every so often would function as effectively as herbicides in controlling aquatic weeds, and perhaps would reduce the need for herbicides.

And if less herbicide is applied to Lake Rousseau, the water source for the Lower Withlacoochee, would it help restore the river and its ecosystem?

WAR is hoping its two year study will reveal the mysteries of the Lower Withlacoochee River and its decline in recent years.