

**The Florida Senate**  
**BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Appropriations

**BILL:** CS/CS/CS/SB 1066

**INTRODUCER:** Appropriations Committee; Appropriations Committee on Agriculture, Environment, and General Government; Environment and Natural Resources Committee; and Senator Brodeur

**SUBJECT:** Tributaries of the St. Johns River

**DATE:** February 16, 2026      **REVISED:** \_\_\_\_\_

ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1. Barriero	Rogers	EN	<u>Fav/CS</u>
2. Reagan	Betta	AEG	<u>Fav/CS</u>
3. Reagan	Sadberry	AP	<u>Fav/CS</u>

**Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:**

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

## **I. Summary:**

CS/CS/CS/SB 1066 creates the Northeast Florida Rivers, Springs, and Community Investment Act. It requires the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to develop a project plan by July 1, 2027, for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River. The project plan must provide for restoration and increased resiliency and recreation benefits of the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers and Silver Springs. Subject to available funding, the restoration project must be completed by December 31, 2032.

The bill directs the DEP to develop an outdoor recreation plan and a related grant program by January 1, 2028, and implement the program by February 1, 2028. The recreation plan must identify and implement projects that increase access to the rivers and springs for recreational activities. Projects on state-owned lands must be completed by December 31, 2035. The grant program must assist river communities in Clay, Marion, Putnam, and St. Johns counties to implement the recreation plan.

The bill directs the Department of Commerce to develop and implement an economic development program for Marion and Putnam Counties by January 1, 2028. The program must support projects that encourage job creation, capital investment, and strengthening and diversification of each county's economy.

The bill also establishes, by October 31, 2026, the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council within the DEP. The council must submit an advisory report by February 1, 2027, which provides recommendations for projects to be included in the outdoor recreation plan, guidelines to govern the grant and economic development programs, and measures to minimize the restoration plan's impact on property owners and businesses.

The bill directs the DEP to hire a project lead by August 31, 2026, to oversee implementation of this act.

The Department of Environmental Protection may incur indeterminate costs to hire a project lead and develop and implement the restoration project plan, outdoor recreation plan, and grant program. The Department of Commerce may incur indeterminate costs to develop the economic development program. See Section V., Fiscal Impact Statement.

The bill shall take effect upon becoming law.

## II. Present Situation:

### St. Johns River

St. Johns River is the largest river in Florida, and one of the few rivers in the United States that flows north.<sup>1</sup> From its source in the marshes south of Melbourne to its mouth in Mayport, the river drops a total of less than 30 feet, or about one inch per mile. The incoming tide from the Atlantic Ocean causes the river to reverse its flow twice a day, and in periods of low water, tides may cause a reverse flow as far south as Lake Monroe, 161 miles upstream from the river's mouth. High and sustained northeasterly winds can result in many days of reversed flow. For these reasons, it is difficult for the river current to naturally flush pollutants.<sup>2</sup>

The St. Johns River is divided into three watersheds, also known as drainage basins.<sup>3</sup> Because the river flows north, the upper basin is the area to the south that forms its marshy headwaters in Indian River and Brevard counties. The middle basin is the area in central Florida where the river widens, forming lakes Harney, Jesup, Monroe, and George. The lower basin is the area in northeast Florida from Putnam County to the river's mouth in Duval County, where the river empties into the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>4</sup> The Ocklawaha River, with contributions from Silver Springs and Silver River, is the largest tributary entering the St. Johns River.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), *The St. Johns River*, <https://www.sjrwmd.com/waterways/st-johns-river/> (last visited Jan. 13, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> SJRWMD, *The St. Johns River*, <https://www.sjrwmd.com/waterways/st-johns-river/> (last visited Jan. 13, 2025).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> SJRWMD, *A Story of the St. Johns River: The big picture*, 3 (2024), available at <https://aws.sjrwmd.com/SJRWMD/waterways/SJR-big-picture-fact-sheet-2024.pdf>.

## Silver River and Silver Springs

Silver Springs is a first-magnitude spring that forms the headwaters of the Silver River.<sup>6</sup> There are 30 springs in the Silver Springs group. The flow of Silver Springs is supplied by a vast system of fractures and solution channels in the limestone and dolomite of the Floridan aquifer, with approximately 45 percent of the flow originating from Mammoth Spring (also known as the Main Spring) and additional flow from smaller springs and boils downstream. The Silver River flows eastward for about five miles through a dense cypress swamp before entering the Ocklawaha River.<sup>7</sup>

Silver Springs faces significant challenges, including increased nutrient pollution, algae growth, and declines in fish communities.<sup>8</sup> In addition, spring discharge has declined over 30 percent since the 1930s, a shift that can be attributed to changing rainfall and recharge patterns and groundwater withdrawal.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> SJRWMD, *Silver Springs*, <https://www.sjrwmd.com/waterways/springs/silver/> (last visited Jan. 13, 2026).

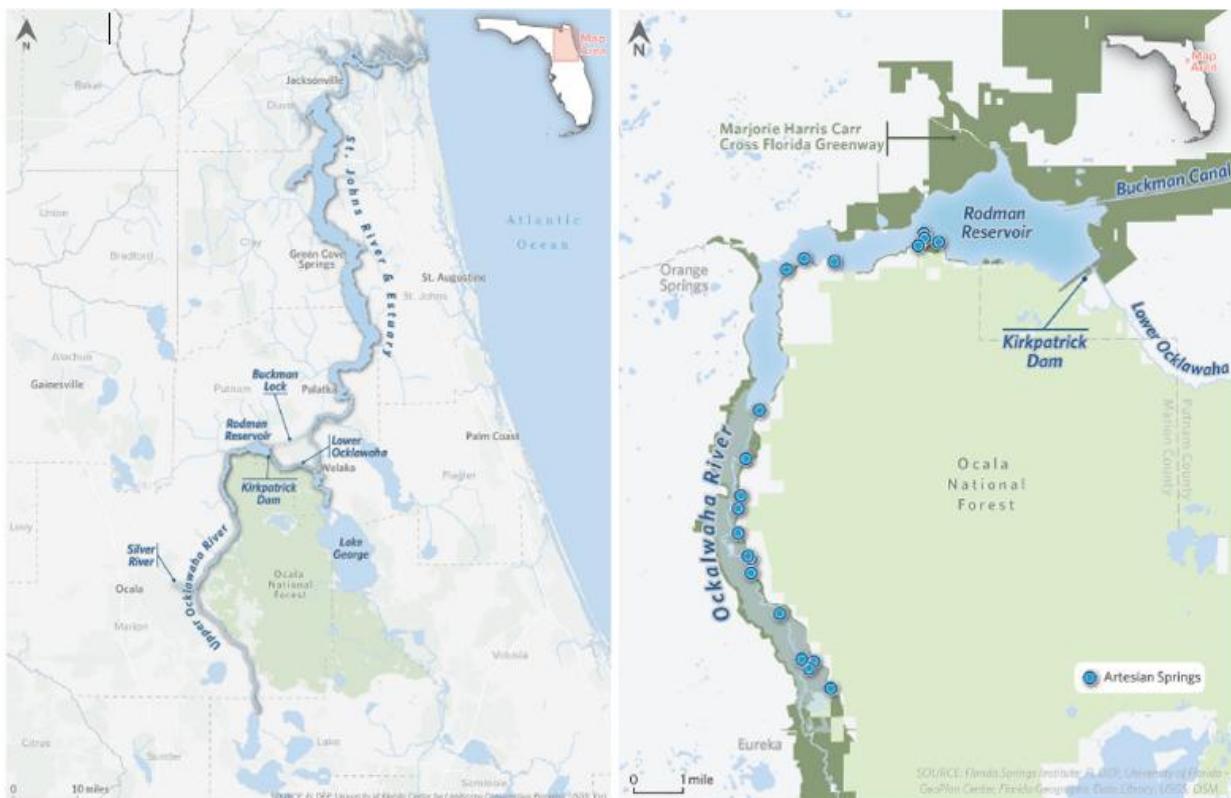
<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> Howard Odum, *Trophic Structure and Productivity of Silver Springs, Florida*, 55-112 (1957), available at <https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/1948571>; Robert L. Knight, 101, 147 (1980), available at <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022031/00001/images>; Douglas A. Munch, et al., *Fifty-Year Retrospective Study of the Ecology of Silver Springs, Florida*, viii, xiii, xv (2006), available at <https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2010107711.xhtml>.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew B. Sutherland, et al., *Minimum Flows Determination for Silver Springs, Marion County, Florida*, SJRWMD, 5 (2017), available at <https://static.sjrwmd.com/sjrwmd/secure/technicalreports/TP/SJ2017-2.pdf>.

## Ocklawaha River

The Ocklawaha River was historically a free-flowing river system connecting Central Florida to the St. Johns River, supporting extensive floodplain forests, springs, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation.<sup>10</sup> Construction of the Kirkpatrick (Rodman) Dam<sup>11</sup> and Rodman Reservoir as part of the Cross Florida Barge Canal<sup>12</sup> altered the river by flooding approximately 7,500 acres, submerging more than 20 freshwater springs, and eliminating roughly 16 miles of the natural river channel.<sup>13</sup> Although the canal project was halted in 1981 and officially deauthorized in



1991, the dam and reservoir remain in place, causing extensive hydrological and ecological impacts.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See generally A. Quinton White Jr., et al., *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report*, 11 (2024), available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390798234\\_Ocklawaha\\_River\\_Restoration\\_Science\\_and\\_Economics\\_Report](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/390798234_Ocklawaha_River_Restoration_Science_and_Economics_Report).

<sup>11</sup> The Florida Legislature officially renamed the Rodman Dam the George Kirkpatrick Dam in 1998.

<sup>12</sup> The Cross Florida Barge Canal was intended to connect the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean through an inland shipping route across Florida. After the project was halted, the abandoned corridor became the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway. Today, the Greenway stretches more than 70,000 acres across 110 miles of Central Florida. Florida Museum, *Florida Environmental History: The Cross Florida Barge Canal*, <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/earth-systems/blog/florida-environmental-history-the-cross-florida-barge-canal/> (last visited Jan. 13, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> See Florida Tax Watch, *A River (No Longer) Runs Through It: Ocklawaha River Restoration*, 2 (2022), available at <https://floridatxwatch.org/DesktopModules/EasyDNNNews/DocumentDownload.ashx?portalid=210&moduleid=35706&articleid=19140&documentid=1020>.

<sup>14</sup> See DEP, *Joint Application for Environmental Resource Permit and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit*, 1-3 – 1-4, 1-8 (1997), available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hb07T\\_nRkQmZRxrF6XJXg7s5dZxBXS8-/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hb07T_nRkQmZRxrF6XJXg7s5dZxBXS8-/view). White, *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report* at 4, 6 (depicting maps of the Ocklawaha River).

### ***Rodman Reservoir and Kirkpatrick Dam***

The Rodman Reservoir is an approximately 9,500-acre man-made impoundment of the Ocklawaha River that was constructed as part of the former Cross Florida Barge Canal Project.<sup>15</sup> The reservoir has a drainage basin of 2,800 square miles, with its headwaters in the Green Swamp and Lake Apopka.<sup>16</sup> Access to the reservoir is controlled by the Buckman Lock, while the Kirkpatrick Dam controls the reservoir's level.<sup>17</sup> The 7,200 foot long earthen dam has a four-gate spillway designed to discharge up to 36,000 cubic feet of water per second from reservoir.<sup>18</sup> The Rodman Reservoir and Kirkman Dam's spillway tailwaters support recreational and subsistence fisheries, including Florida bass and black crappie.<sup>19</sup>

The construction of the dam and reservoir has resulted in significant adverse impacts to the Ocklawaha River and floodplain, including: (1) chronic inundation of the floodplain and degradation of water quality in the Rodman Reservoir and upper river; (2) reduced downstream fish and shellfish productivity, (3) elimination of critical plant and wildlife dispersal corridors due to fragmentation of the Ocklawaha River and floodplain habitat; and (4) increased exotic and nuisance plant species from stagnant water levels and flow velocities created by the Kirkpatrick Dam.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has classified the dam and reservoir as a potential high hazard to the downstream area in the event of failure or mis-operation of the dam or facilities.<sup>21</sup> It has been estimated that the 11,000-acre inundation area contains approximately 538 properties that, if flooded, could result in loss of life and represent a total loss of \$57.4 million.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Ocklawaha River Restoration***

Since the 1970s, numerous groups have advocated for removing the Kirkpatrick Dam and restoration of the Rodman Reservoir to the Ocklawaha River floodplain due to ecological damage to the floodplain and surrounding ecosystems.<sup>23</sup> In 1993, the Florida Legislature directed the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to study the environmental and economic efficacy of several alternatives, including:

<sup>15</sup> DEP, *Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area Unit Management Plan (2017-2027)*, 152 (2018), available at <https://floridadep.gov/parks/parks-office-park-planning/documents/marjorie-harris-carr-cross-florida-greenway-2018-approved>.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 212.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 211.

<sup>19</sup> See *id.*; Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), *Rodman Reservoir*, <https://myfwc.com/fishing/freshwater/sites-forecasts/ne/rodman-reservoir/> (last visited Jan. 14, 2026); DEP, *Rodman Recreation Area*, <https://www.floridastateparks.org/parks-and-trails/rodman-recreation-area> (last visited Jan. 14, 2026).

<sup>20</sup> DEP, *Joint Application for Environmental Resource Permit and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit* at 1-8.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), *National Inventory of Dams: Kirkpatrick Dam and Rodman Reservoir*, <https://nid.sec.usace.army.mil/nid/#/dams/system/FL00156/inspections> (last visited Jan. 13, 2026). See generally Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Fact Sheet 2.3: Mitigation of Dams and Reservoirs*, 1 (2022), available at [https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema\\_p-2181-fact-sheet-2-3-dams-and-reservoirs.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_p-2181-fact-sheet-2-3-dams-and-reservoirs.pdf) (providing description of dam hazard potential classifications).

<sup>22</sup> White, *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report* at 7, 49. See URS Corporation, *Emergency Action Plan: Kirkpatrick Dam and Rodman Reservoir*, 27-36 (2005), available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GAWXaDS7-V\\_hKUdfQY1AjxW5mwf3bNn4/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GAWXaDS7-V_hKUdfQY1AjxW5mwf3bNn4/view); DEP, *Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area Unit Management Plan* at 152.

<sup>23</sup> DEP, *Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area Unit Management Plan* at 151.

- Full restoration of the Ocklawaha River: Restoring river hydrology and floodplain function to preconstruction conditions through breaching of the dam, with limited removal and/or alteration of structures and alteration of topography.
- Partial restoration of the Ocklawaha River: Restoring river hydrology and floodplain function to preconstruction conditions through breaching of the dam, with limited removal and/or alteration of structures and alteration of topography.
- Total retention of the Rodman Reservoir: Retaining the reservoir at its current size and depth, with active management to enhance fish and/or wildlife. Removal and/or alteration of structures and topography would be limited.
- Partial retention of the Rodman reservoir: Reducing the size of the reservoir to the extent that a part of the river can be restored and a part of the reservoir can be retained.<sup>24</sup>

In 1997, following a recommendation from the St. Johns River Water Management District, the DEP submitted a joint application for a state environmental resource permit and federal dredge and fill permit to implement the partial restoration of the Ocklawaha River.<sup>25</sup> Partial restoration was determined to be the most cost-effective alternative for addressing the overall objectives of the restoration project.<sup>26</sup> The major components of the proposed partial restoration include:

- Drawdown of the reservoir to be accomplished in three phases;
- Limited construction of channel stabilization and erosion control structures in the Ocklawaha River;
- Limited planting of native plant species to provide for erosion control;
- Partial leveling of the exposed barge canal side-cast spoil berms;
- Restoration of the historic Ocklawaha River channel flow by filling the barge canal where it intersects the river channel;
- Restoration of the historic Deep Creek channel flow by filling the barge canal where it intersects the creek channel;
- Restoration of the historic Camp Branch floodplain and channel flow by filling the barge canal where it intersects the creek channel;
- Closure and securing of the Buckman Lock;
- Removal of 2,000 feet of the Kirkpatrick Dam (earthen portion);
- Partial filling and restoration of the spillway tailrace to natural grade; and
- Development and implementation of a cultural resources operating plan.<sup>27</sup>

In 2001, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service issued an Environmental Impact Statement recommending the partial restoration alternative.<sup>28</sup> To date, no action has been taken to implement that recommendation.

<sup>24</sup> See ch. 93-213, s.54, Laws of Fla.; DEP, *Joint Application for Environmental Resource Permit and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit*, 1-7 (1997), available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hb07T\\_nRkQmZRxrF6XJXg7s5dZxBXS8-/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hb07T_nRkQmZRxrF6XJXg7s5dZxBXS8-/view).

<sup>25</sup> See DEP, *Joint Application for Environmental Resource Permit and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit*.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 1-7.

<sup>27</sup> DEP, *Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway State Recreation and Conservation Area Unit Management Plan* at 152; U.S. Dep't of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service, *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Occupancy and Use of National Forest Lands and Ocklawaha River Restoration*, 3-2 – 3-3 (2001), on file with the Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources.

<sup>28</sup> USDA, *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Occupancy and Use of National Forest Lands and Ocklawaha River Restoration*, (2001).

Restoration of the Ocklawaha River has the potential to produce a range of benefits, including increased freshwater flow, the return of historic fish communities, and enhanced access for other species that support spring and river ecosystem health.<sup>29</sup> Restoration is also expected to restore the flow of approximately 20 nearby springs that could support public use and tourism.<sup>30</sup> Increased flow from the Ocklawaha River to the Lower St. Johns River and estuary would reduce saltwater intrusion, improve water quality and freshwater food webs, and contribute to eelgrass growth and dispersal in the Lower St. Johns River.<sup>31</sup>

Additional benefits include restoration of floodplain forest habitat and reestablishment of historic connectivity through the floodplain forest, which provides sufficient contiguous habitat for many native vertebrate species in the region.<sup>32</sup> Restoration would also eliminate public tax expenditures associated with the operation and maintenance of the Buckman Lock, reduce costs related to the management of exotic and nuisance vegetation, and enhance recreational opportunities along the restored river.<sup>33</sup>

Restoration of the river would also remove structural flood hazards associated with dam failure.<sup>34</sup> While breaching the dam would result in the loss of the reservoir and spillway flows that supports existing fisheries, recreational enhancements, such as improved Ocklawaha and Lower St. Johns River access for boat and shore-based anglers, could offset some of the impacts to fishermen.<sup>35</sup>

## State Advisory Bodies

Advisory councils are a type of advisory body created by specific statutory enactment and appointed to function on a continuing basis for the study of the problems arising in a specified functional or program area of state government and to provide recommendations and policy alternatives.<sup>36</sup> Advisory bodies must be established, evaluated, or maintained in accordance with the following provisions:

- They may be created only when it is found to be necessary and beneficial to the furtherance of a public purpose.
- They must be terminated by the Legislature when it is no longer necessary and beneficial to the furtherance of a public purpose.

<sup>29</sup> Nathaniel P. Hitt, et al., *Dam Removal Increases American Eel Abundance in Distant Headwater Streams*, 1171-1179 (2012), available at <https://academic.oup.com/tafs/article-abstract/141/5/1171/7877588?redirectedFrom=fulltext>; Frank Jordan, SJRWMD, *Environmental Studies Concerning Four Alternatives for Rodman Reservoir and the Lower Ocklawaha River*, 6 (1994), available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/13pcShL42Uw4xcEdDSnAAT\\_CW06ndl9/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/13pcShL42Uw4xcEdDSnAAT_CW06ndl9/view); Sutherland, *Minimum Flows Determination for Silver Springs, Marion County, Florida* at 5-21.

<sup>30</sup> White, *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report* at 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 7.

<sup>32</sup> USDA, *Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Occupancy and Use of National Forest Lands and Ocklawaha River Restoration* at 1-6.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 2-5.

<sup>34</sup> Florida Tax Watch, *A River (No Longer) Runs Through It: Ocklawaha River Restoration*, 7 (2022), available at <https://floridatxwatch.org/DesktopModules/EasyDNNNews/DocumentDownload.ashx?portalid=210&moduleid=35706&articleid=19140&documentid=1020>; White, *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report* at 16-17.

<sup>35</sup> White, *Ocklawaha River Restoration: Science and Economics Report* at 6.

<sup>36</sup> Section 20.03(7), F.S.

- The Legislature and the public must be kept informed of the numbers, purposes, memberships, activities, and expenses of advisory bodies.<sup>37</sup>

An advisory body may not be created unless:

- It meets a statutorily defined purpose;
- Its powers and responsibilities conform with the statutory definitions for governmental units,<sup>38</sup>
- Its members, unless expressly provided otherwise in the State Constitution, are appointed for four-year staggered terms; and
- Its members, unless expressly provided otherwise by specific statutory enactment, serve without additional compensation or honorarium, and are authorized to receive only per diem and reimbursement for travel expenses.<sup>39</sup>

Unless an exemption is otherwise specifically provided by law, all meetings of an advisory body must be public.<sup>40</sup> Minutes, including a record of all votes cast, must be maintained for all meetings.<sup>41</sup>

A law creating an advisory body must provide for its repeal on October 2 of the third year after enactment unless the law is reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.<sup>42</sup>

### **III. Effect of Proposed Changes:**

**Section 1** provides that this act may be cited as the “Northeast Florida Rivers, Springs, and Community Investment Act.”

**Section 2** creates s. 373.464, F.S., regarding Ocklawaha River restoration, recreation, and economic development. The bill requires the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), no later than August 31, 2026, to hire a full-time equivalent contractor or employee, whose position title will be project lead, to oversee the implementation of this act. The project lead must have subject matter expertise in conservation and recreation planning.

#### **Restoration Project Plan**

The bill provides that, by July 1, 2027, the DEP must develop a project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River. The project plan must provide for restoration and increased resiliency and recreation benefits of the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers and Silver Springs. The project plan must:

- Be designed to restore the Ocklawaha River’s natural flow, hydrology and floodplain function to the approximate conditions that existed before construction of the Cross Florida

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<sup>37</sup> Section 20.052, F.S.

<sup>38</sup> See section 20.03, F.S., for definitions of governmental units.

<sup>39</sup> Section 20.052(4), F.S.

<sup>40</sup> Section 20.052(5)(c), F.S.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

<sup>42</sup> Section 20.052(8), F.S.

Barge Canal project and its associated project works by implementing measures that include breaching the Kirkman Dam and decommissioning the Buckman Lock.

- Incorporate the best available science and include engineering and design updates, including topographic and bathymetric surveys, and precise estimates of material to be dredged or excavated.
- Provide recommendations for road and bridge construction that is compatible with the partial restoration plan and ensures continued access for the communities west of the project.
- Include estimates by fiscal year of the cost of implementing the project plan and potential sources of funding for such costs.

The bill provides that, notwithstanding any law or rule, the project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River is an environmental restoration or enhancement project subject to a general permit from the DEP and water management districts for environmental restoration or enhancement.

The bill provides that, subject to the provision of state, federal, or other funds, the DEP must complete the restoration project by December 31, 2032.

### **Advisory Council**

The bill establishes, by October 31, 2026, the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council. The council would be assigned to, and administratively housed within, the DEP. The bill requires the project lead to serve as the council chair, and the members must meet at the call of the project lead. Members must serve without compensation but are entitled to reimbursement for per diem and travel expenses. Council members must serve 4-year terms, except that the initial terms must be staggered. The council must be composed of 16 members. Nine of the council members must be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the Governor and must include:

- Two representatives of river recreation-related businesses local to Marion or Putnam Counties.
- Two representatives of outdoor recreation user groups, one of whom represents fishing interests local to Marion or Putnam Counties.
- One representative of the department's Office of Greenways and Trails.
- One representative of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC's) Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management.
- One representative of the FWC's Imperiled Species Management Section.
- One representative of the Department of Commerce.
- One representative of an environmental community support organization who has subject matter expertise on springs or rivers.

Six of the council members must be appointed by the boards of county commissioners for the following counties:

- Putnam County must appoint two members, one of whom must oversee parks and recreation for the county.
- Marion County must appoint two members, one of whom must oversee parks and recreation for the county.

- Clay County must appoint one member.
- St. Johns County must appoint one member.

One member must be the commanding officer of Naval Air Station Jacksonville or his or her designee.

The bill directs the council to submit an advisory report to the Governor, the Legislature, and the DEP by February 1, 2027. The report must include all of the following:

- Recommendations for projects to be included in the outdoor recreation plan created by this bill, including priorities for state-funded land projects.
- Recommendations to the DEP for the creation of guidelines to govern the grant program created by this bill.
- Recommendations to the Department of Commerce for the creation of guidelines to administer the economic development program created by this bill.
- Recommendations for measures to minimize the impact of the restoration plan on property owners or businesses directly affected by the restoration project.

The bill repeals this subsection on October 2, 2029, unless reviewed and saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

### **Outdoor Recreation Plan**

The bill directs the DEP to develop an outdoor recreation plan in collaboration with the FWC, the Northeast Florida River and the Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council, and the local governments of river communities in Clay, Marion, Putnam, and St. Johns Counties. The plan must identify and implement projects for enhanced and expanded river and springs access for recreational activities, such as fishing, hunting, swimming, wildlife viewing, paddling, and hiking. Such projects must be compatible with the project plan and applicable statutes. The outdoor recreation plan must be made available for public comment before its implementation.

The bill requires the DEP to implement the outdoor recreation plan by January 1, 2028. Subject to the provision of state, federal, or other funds, the DEP must complete projects on state-owned lands identified in the plan by December 31, 2035.

### **Grant Program**

The bill provides that, by January 1, 2028, the DEP must develop a grant program for river communities in Clay, Marion, Putnam, and St. Johns Counties to implement the outdoor recreation plan. The grant program must be compatible with the project plan and outdoor recreation plan. The DEP must implement the grant program by February 1, 2028.

### **Economic Development Program**

The bill directs the Department of Commerce to develop guidelines and processes for an economic development program for Marion and Putnam Counties. The economic development program must support projects that encourage job creation, capital investment, and strengthening

and diversification of each county's economy. It must be compatible with the project plan, the outdoor recreation plan, and the grant program. The Department of Commerce must implement the economic development program by January 1, 2028.

**IV. Constitutional Issues:**

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

**V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

The Department of Environmental Protection may incur indeterminate costs to hire a project lead and develop and implement the restoration project plan, outdoor recreation plan, and grant program. The Department of Commerce may incur indeterminate costs to develop the economic development program.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill creates section 373.464 of the Florida Statutes.

**IX. Additional Information:****A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**  
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)**CS/CS/CS by Appropriations on February 12, 2026:**

The committee substitute:

- Requires the project plan to restore the Ocklawaha River's natural flow and implement measures that include breaching the Kirkpatrick Dam and decommissioning the Buckman Lock.
- Removes the requirement that the project plan be based on the restoration design and steps in the Joint Application for Environmental Resource and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit.
- Extends the start date for the implementation of the grant program from January 1, 2028, to February 1, 2028.

**CS/CS by Appropriations Committee on Agriculture, Environment, and General Government on February 4, 2026:**

The committee substitute:

- Clarifies that the project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River to the approximate conditions that existed before the construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project.
- Provides an effective date of October 31, 2026, for the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Advisory Council to be established.

**CS by Environment and Natural Resources on Jan. 20, 2026:**

Added the commanding officer of Naval Air Station Jacksonville as one of the members on the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council.

**B. Amendments:**

None.