

By the Appropriations Committee on Agriculture, Environment, and General Government; the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources; and Senator Brodeur

601-02527-26

20261066c2

A bill to be entitled

An act relating to tributaries of the St. Johns River; providing a short title; creating s. 373.464, F.S.; requiring the Department of Environmental Protection, by a specified date, to hire a project lead to oversee the implementation of the act; requiring that the project lead have certain expertise; requiring the department to develop, by a specified date, a project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River; specifying requirements for the project plan; providing that the project plan is an environmental restoration or enhancement project subject to a general permit from the department and water management districts; requiring the department to complete the project plan by a specified date, subject to the provision of funds; providing for the creation of the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council by a specified date; assigning the council to the Department of Environmental Protection; providing that the project lead is the chair of the council; providing for council membership, meetings, and duties; requiring the council to submit an advisory report to the Governor, the Legislature, and the department by a specified date; specifying requirements for the advisory report; providing for future repeal; requiring the department to develop an outdoor recreation plan, in collaboration with certain commissions, councils, and local governments of river

601-02527-26

20261066c2

communities; specifying requirements for the outdoor recreation plan; requiring the department to implement the plan by a specified date; requiring the department to complete projects on state-owned lands in the outdoor recreation plan by a specified date, subject to certain funding; requiring the department to develop a grant program for a specified purpose; requiring that the grant program be compatible with certain plans; requiring the department to implement the grant program by a specified date; requiring the Department of Commerce to develop guidelines and processes for and implement an economic development program for Marion and Putnam Counties for a specified purpose by a specified date; requiring that the economic development plan be compatible with certain plans and programs; requiring the Department of Commerce to implement the economic development program by a specified date; providing an effective date.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

Section 1. This act may be cited as the "Northeast Florida Rivers, Springs, and Community Investment Act."

Section 2. Section 373.464, Florida Statutes, is created to read:

373.464 Ocklawaha River restoration, recreation, and economic development.—

(1) PROJECT LEAD.—The department shall, no later than August 31, 2026, hire a full-time equivalent contractor or

601-02527-26

20261066c2

59 employee, whose position title will be project lead, to oversee
60 the implementation of this act. The project lead must have
61 subject matter expertise in conservation and recreation
62 planning.

63 (2) PROJECT PLAN.—

64 (a) By July 1, 2027, the department shall develop a project
65 plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River. The project
66 plan must provide for restoration and increased resiliency and
67 recreation benefits of the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers and
68 Silver Springs. The project plan must be designed to restore the
69 Ocklawaha River hydrology and floodplain function to the
70 approximate conditions that existed before the construction of
71 the Cross Florida Barge Canal project and its associated project
72 works, including, but not limited to, the Kirkpatrick Dam and
73 Buckman Lock. The project plan must be based on the restoration
74 design and steps set forth in the department's pending Joint
75 Application for Environmental Resource and Federal Dredge and
76 Fill Permit. The project plan must incorporate the best
77 available science and include engineering and design updates,
78 including topographic and bathymetric surveys, and precise
79 estimates of material to be dredged or excavated. In addition,
80 the project plan must provide recommendations for road and
81 bridge construction which are compatible with the partial
82 restoration plan and ensure continued access for the communities
83 west of the project. The project plan must include estimates by
84 fiscal year of the cost of implementing the project plan and
85 potential sources of funding for such costs.

86 (b) Notwithstanding any law or rule, the project plan for
87 the restoration of the Ocklawaha River is an environmental

601-02527-26

20261066c2

restoration or enhancement project subject to a general permit from the department and water management districts for environmental restoration or enhancement pursuant to rule 62-330.405, Florida Administrative Code, and rule 62-330.485, Florida Administrative Code.

(c) Subject to the provision of state, federal, or other funds, the department shall complete the restoration project plan by December 31, 2032.

(3) NORTHEAST FLORIDA RIVER AND SPRINGS RECREATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL.—

(a) Establishment of the council.—

1. By October 31, 2026, the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council, an advisory council as defined in s. 20.03(7), shall be established and assigned to the department. The council shall be administratively housed within the department. The project lead shall serve as the council chair, and the members shall meet at the call of the project lead. Members shall serve without compensation but are entitled to reimbursement for per diem and travel expenses pursuant to s. 112.061. Council members shall serve 4-year terms, except that the initial terms shall be staggered.

2. The council shall be composed of the following 16 members:

a. Nine members of the council shall be appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the Governor and shall include:

(I) Two representatives of river recreation-related businesses local to Marion or Putnam County.

(II) Two representatives of outdoor recreation user groups,

601-02527-26

20261066c2

one of whom represents fishing interests local to Marion or Putnam County.

(III) One representative of the department's Office of Greenways and Trails.

(IV) One representative of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management.

(V) One representative of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Imperiled Species Management Section.

(VI) One representative of the Department of Commerce.

(VII) One representative of an environmental community support organization who has subject matter expertise in springs or rivers.

b. Six members of the council shall be appointed by the boards of county commissioners for the following counties:

(I) Putnam County shall appoint two members, one of whom oversees parks and recreation for the county.

(II) Marion County shall appoint two members, one of whom oversees parks and recreation for the county.

(III) Clay County shall appoint one member.

(IV) St. Johns County shall appoint one member.

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

(b) Report.—The council shall submit an advisory report to the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the department by February 1, 2027. The report must include all of the following:

1. Recommendations for projects to be included in the outdoor recreation plan created in subsection (4), including

601-02527-26

20261066c2

146 priorities for state-funded land projects.

147 2. Recommendations to the department for the creation of
148 guidelines to govern the grant program created in subsection
149 (5).

150 3. Recommendations to the Department of Commerce for the
151 creation of guidelines to administer the economic development
152 program created in subsection (6).

153 4. Recommendations for measures to minimize the impact of
154 the restoration plan on property owners or businesses directly
155 affected by the restoration project.

156 (c) Repeal.—In accordance with s. 20.052(8), this
157 subsection is repealed October 2, 2029, unless reviewed and
158 saved from repeal through reenactment by the Legislature.

159 (4) OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN.—

160 (a) The department, in collaboration with the Fish and
161 Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Northeast Florida River
162 and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory
163 Council, and the local governments of river communities in Clay,
164 Marion, Putnam, and St. Johns Counties, shall develop an outdoor
165 recreation plan.

166 (b) The outdoor recreation plan must identify and implement
167 projects for enhanced and expanded river and springs access for
168 recreational activities, such as fishing, hunting, swimming,
169 wildlife viewing, paddling, and hiking. Such projects must be
170 compatible with the project plan and applicable statutes. The
171 outdoor recreation plan must be made available for public
172 comment before its implementation.

173 (c) The department shall implement the outdoor recreation
174 plan by January 1, 2028.

601-02527-26

20261066c2

175 (d) Subject to the provision of state, federal, or other
176 funds, the department shall complete projects on state-owned
177 lands identified in the outdoor recreation plan by December 31,
178 2035.

179 (5) GRANT PROGRAM.—

180 (a) By January 1, 2028, the department shall develop a
181 grant program for river communities in Clay, Marion, Putnam, and
182 St. Johns Counties to implement the outdoor recreation plan.

183 (b) The grant program must be compatible with the project
184 plan and outdoor recreation plan.

185 (c) The department shall implement the grant program by
186 January 1, 2028.

187 (6) ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM.—

188 (a) The Department of Commerce shall develop guidelines and
189 processes for an economic development program for Marion and
190 Putnam Counties. The economic development program must support
191 projects that encourage job creation, capital investment, and
192 strengthening and diversification of each county's economy.

193 (b) The economic development program must be compatible
194 with the project plan, the outdoor recreation plan, and the
195 grant program.

196 (c) The Department of Commerce shall implement the economic
197 development program by January 1, 2028.

198 Section 3. This act shall take effect upon becoming a law.