

CS/HB 981

2026

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; creating the Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and Economic Development Advisory Council; 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

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26 future repeal; requiring the department to develop an  
27 outdoor recreation plan, in collaboration with certain  
28 commissions, councils, and local governments of river  
29 communities; specifying requirements for the outdoor  
30 recreation plan; requiring the department to implement  
31 the plan by a specified date; requiring the department  
32 to complete projects on state-owned lands in the  
33 outdoor recreation plan by a specified date, subject  
34 to certain funding; requiring the department to a  
35 develop grant program for a specified purpose;  
36 requiring that the grant program be compatible with  
37 certain plans; requiring the department to implement  
38 the plan by a specified date; requiring the Department  
39 of Commerce to develop guidelines and processes for  
40 and implement an economic development program for  
41 Marion and Putnam Counties for a specified purpose by  
42 a specified date; requiring that the economic  
43 development plan be compatible with certain plans and  
44 programs; requiring the Department of Commerce to  
45 implement the economic development program by a  
46 specified date; providing an effective date.

47  
48 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:

49  
50 **Section 1.** This act may be cited as the "Northeast Florida

51       Rivers, Springs, and Community Investment Act."

52       **Section 2. Section 373.464, Florida Statutes, is created**

53       **to read:**

54       373.464 Ocklawaha River restoration, recreation, and  
55       economic development.—

56       (1) PROJECT LEAD.—The department shall, no later than  
57       August 31, 2026, hire a full-time equivalent contractor or  
58       employee, whose position title will be project lead, to oversee  
59       the implementation of this act. The project lead must have  
60       subject matter expertise in conservation and recreation  
61       planning.

62       (2) PROJECT PLAN.—

63       (a) By July 1, 2027, the department shall develop a  
64       project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River. The  
65       project plan must provide for restoration and increased  
66       resiliency and recreation benefits of the Ocklawaha and St.  
67       Johns Rivers and Silver Springs. The project plan must be  
68       consistent with the partial restoration plan described in the  
69       2001 Final Environmental Impact Statement prepared by the United  
70       States Department of Agriculture Forest Service for the  
71       department's Ocklawaha River Restoration Project, as described  
72       in the department's Joint Application for Environmental Resource  
73       Permit and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit, dated November 24,  
74       1997. The project plan must include engineering and design  
75       updates, including topographic and bathymetric surveys, and

76 precise estimates of material to be dredged or excavated. In  
77 addition, the project plan must provide recommendations for road  
78 and bridge construction that is compatible with the partial  
79 restoration plan and ensures continued access for the  
80 communities west of the project. The project plan must include  
81 estimates by fiscal year of the cost of implementing the project  
82 plan and potential sources of funding for such costs.

83 (b) Notwithstanding any law or rule, the project plan for  
84 the restoration of the Ocklawaha River is an environmental  
85 restoration or enhancement project subject to a general permit  
86 from the department and water management districts for  
87 environmental restoration or enhancement pursuant to rule 62-  
88 330.405, F.A.C., and rule 62-330.485, F.A.C.

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

92 (3) NORTHEAST FLORIDA RIVER AND SPRINGS RECREATION AND  
93 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADVISORY COUNCIL.-

94 (a) Establishment of the council.-

95 1. The Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and  
96 Economic Development Advisory Council, an advisory council as  
97 defined in s. 20.03(7), is established and assigned to the  
98 department. The council shall be administratively housed within  
99 the department. The project lead shall serve as the council  
100 chair, and the members shall meet at the call of the project

101 lead. Members shall serve without compensation but are entitled  
102 to reimbursement for per diem and travel expenses pursuant to s.  
103 112.061. Council members shall serve 4-year terms, except that  
104 the initial terms shall be staggered.

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

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

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

111 (II) Two representatives of outdoor recreation user  
112 groups, one of whom represents fishing interests local to Marion  
113 or Putnam Counties.

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

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

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

121 (VI) One representative of the Department of Commerce.

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

125 b. Six members of the council shall be appointed by the

126 boards of county commissioners for the following counties:

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

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

131 (III) Clay County shall appoint one member.

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

133 c. The commanding officer of Naval Air Station  
134 Jacksonville or his or her designee.

135 (b) Report.—The council shall submit an advisory report to  
136 the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the  
137 House of Representatives, and the department by February 1,  
138 2027. The report must include all of the following:

139 1. Recommendations for projects to be included in the  
140 outdoor recreation plan created in subsection (4), including  
141 priorities for state-funded land projects.

142 2. Recommendations to the department for the creation of  
143 guidelines to govern the grant program created in subsection  
144 (5).

145 3. Recommendations to the Department of Commerce for the  
146 creation of guidelines to administer the economic development  
147 program created in subsection (6).

148 4. Recommendations for measures to minimize the impact of  
149 the restoration plan on property owners or businesses directly  
150 affected by the restoration project.

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

154        (4) OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN.—

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

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

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

170        (d) Subject to the provision of state, federal, or other  
171        funds, the department shall complete projects on state-owned  
172        lands identified in the outdoor recreation plan by December 31,  
173        2035.

174        (5) GRANT PROGRAM.—

175        (a) By January 1, 2028, the department shall develop a

176 grant program for river communities in Clay, Marion, Putnam, and  
177 St. Johns Counties to implement the outdoor recreation plan.

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

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

182 (6) ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM.—

183 (a) The Department of Commerce shall develop guidelines  
184 and processes for an economic development program for Marion and  
185 Putnam Counties. The economic development program must support  
186 projects that encourage job creation, capital investment, and  
187 strengthening and diversification of each county's economy.

188 (b) The economic development program must be compatible  
189 with the project plan, the outdoor recreation plan, and the  
190 grant program.

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

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