

CS/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 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

26 advisory report; providing for future repeal;
27 requiring the department to develop an outdoor
28 recreation plan, in collaboration with certain
29 commissions, councils, and local governments of river
30 communities; specifying requirements for the outdoor
31 recreation plan; requiring the department to implement
32 the plan by a specified date; requiring the department
33 to complete projects on state-owned lands in the
34 outdoor recreation plan by a specified date, subject
35 to certain funding; requiring the department to
36 develop a grant program for a specified purpose;
37 requiring that the grant program be compatible with
38 certain plans; requiring the department to implement
39 the plan by a specified date; requiring the Department
40 of Commerce to develop guidelines and processes for
41 and implement an economic development program for
42 Marion and Putnam Counties for a specified purpose by
43 a specified date; requiring that the economic
44 development plan be compatible with certain plans and
45 programs; requiring the Department of Commerce to
46 implement the economic development program by a
47 specified date; providing an effective date.
48

49 Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Florida:
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51 **Section 1.** This act may be cited as the "Northeast Florida
52 Rivers, Springs, and Community Investment Act."

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

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

57 (1) PROJECT LEAD.—The department shall, no later than
58 August 31, 2026, hire a full-time equivalent contractor or
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
65 project plan for the restoration of the Ocklawaha River. The
66 project plan must provide for restoration and increased
67 resiliency and recreation benefits of the Ocklawaha and St.
68 Johns Rivers and Silver Springs. The project plan shall be
69 designed to restore the Ocklawaha River hydrology and floodplain
70 function to the approximate conditions that existed prior to the
71 construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project and its
72 associated project works, including, but not limited to, the
73 Kirkpatrick Dam and Buckman Lock. The project plan shall be
74 based on the restoration design and steps set forth in the
75 department's pending Joint Application for Environmental

76 Resource and Federal Dredge and Fill Permit. The project plan
77 must incorporate best available science and include engineering
78 and design updates, including topographic and bathymetric
79 surveys, and precise estimates of material to be dredged or
80 excavated. In addition, the project plan must provide
81 recommendations for road and bridge construction that is
82 compatible with the restoration plan and ensures continued
83 access for the communities west of the project. The project plan
84 must include estimates by fiscal year of the cost of
85 implementing the project plan and potential sources of funding
86 for such costs.

87 (b) Notwithstanding any law or rule, the project plan for
88 the restoration of the Ocklawaha River is an environmental
89 restoration or enhancement project subject to a general permit
90 from the department and water management districts for
91 environmental restoration or enhancement pursuant to rule 62-
92 330.405, Florida Administrative Code, and rule 62-330.485,
93 Florida Administrative Code.

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

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

99 (a) Establishment of the council.—

100 1. The Northeast Florida River and Springs Recreation and

101 Economic Development Advisory Council, an advisory council as
102 defined in s. 20.03(7), shall be established by October 31,
103 2026. The council shall be assigned to and administratively
104 housed within the department. The project lead shall serve as
105 the council chair, and the members shall meet at the call of the
106 project lead. Members shall serve without compensation but are
107 entitled to reimbursement for per diem and travel expenses
108 pursuant to s. 112.061. Council members shall serve 4-year
109 terms, except that the initial terms shall be staggered.

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

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

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

116 (II) Two representatives of outdoor recreation user
117 groups, one of whom represents fishing interests local to Marion
118 or Putnam Counties.

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

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

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

126 (VI) One representative of the Department of Commerce.
127 (VII) One representative of an environmental community
128 support organization who has subject matter expertise on springs
129 or rivers.

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

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

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

136 (III) Clay County shall appoint one member.

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

138 c. The commanding officer of Naval Air Station
139 Jacksonville or his or her designee.

140 (b) Report.—The council shall submit an advisory report to
141 the Governor, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the
142 House of Representatives, and the department by February 1,
143 2027. The report must include all of the following:

144 1. Recommendations for projects to be included in the
145 outdoor recreation plan created in subsection (4), including
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
167 implement projects for enhanced and expanded river and springs
168 access for recreational activities, such as fishing, hunting,
169 swimming, wildlife viewing, paddling, and hiking. Such projects
170 must be compatible with the project plan and applicable
171 statutes. The outdoor recreation plan must be made available for
172 public comment before its implementation.

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

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 February 1, 2028.

187 (6) ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM.—

188 (a) The Department of Commerce shall develop guidelines
189 and 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
197 economic development program by January 1, 2028.

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