

Cutting Up the Landscape

Recognizing the importance of Florida's streams, rivers, and lakes to the economy and well being of the state, there are numerous regulatory programs at both the local and state level designed to protect "waters of the state". Wetlands that are connected to surface waters are considered waters of the state and fall under the protection of these programs. Isolated wetlands and possibly seepage wetlands fall outside state waters and remain unprotected unless local programs are initiated. Most programs are designed to protect water quality and as a result only indirectly regulate water quantity. Some Water Management Districts have "surface water management rules" giving wider powers to regulate development that affects surface waters.

By their nature, programs designed to protect surface waters only when they become surface waters clearly do not protect them. In the very flat topography of Florida, where the headwaters of most rivers are a patchwork of isolated wetlands and sloughs, and surface and ground waters intermingle, development in headwaters has greater overall potential to effect water quality and quantity than development of an equal amount of land in downstream locations. In other words, regulating development in floodplain wetlands in the lower reaches of streams and rivers under the pretext of protecting waters of the state has far less potential of realizing its goal than regulating development in the headwaters. There are no programs designed to regulate the alteration of headwater areas to insure that storage, baseflow, and attenuation of peak flow are maintained. "Save our rivers" must begin with saving our headwaters.

This has been demonstrated again and again through out Florida. Agricultural development of the headwaters of the St. Johns River continues to plague all attempts to improve its conditions. Channelization and subsequent agricultural development of the Kissimmee River, the headwaters of the Kissimmee/Everglades system, and continued development in its headwaters near Orlando have forever altered the River of Grass (not withstanding the "water conservation areas"). The Peace River no longer has a headwaters, having been mined for phosphate in the