

# Our opinion: Don't water down standards

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(Photo: Joe Rondone/Democrat)

Nature blessed Florida with two abundant resources, sun and water.

The sun is 93 million miles away, so nobody has found a way to mess with it yet. Water, though, is all around us and seems to be permanently under siege by big builders, farming interests and energy companies.

A half-century ago, it was the Everglades Jetport, an idea that seems utterly mad today. They wanted to build a giant airport far enough from Miami and Fort Lauderdale – hey, it's just a big swamp, right? – for the supersonic transport (which, itself, is no longer a threat.)

Then there was the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, planned to link the Gulf of Mexico and the Jacksonville ports by digging a big ditch from the lower St. Johns River to Yankeetown. As usual, the promise was jobs and commerce, and never mind a few gators and ospreys.

From time to time, different plans to permit offshore oil drilling pop up. Florida and adjoining states have been squabbling, and suing, over Apalachicola River water quality for decades.

And in the past legislative session, a bill to stop cities and counties from banning the injection method known as “fracking” was mercifully put to sleep. It will be back.

Sometimes, we have to wonder which side state government is on.

The Department of Environmental Protection is revising limits on toxic chemicals allowed in surface waters. It is updating human-health limits for 43 chemical compounds that are already regulated, and adopting first-time standards for 39 others.



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Public blasts DEP over new water toxics limits

(<http://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2016/05/14/public-blasts-dep-over-new-water-toxin-standards/84382154/>)



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Letter: DEP allowing polluters more license to pollute

(<http://www.tallahassee.com/story/opinion/2016/05/18/letter-dep-allowing-polluters-more-license-pollute/84487924/>)

Of the 82 various toxic substances, most would have lower standards than recommendations from the Environmental Protection Agency. And of the 43 chemicals now regulated, about a couple dozen would see limits increased beyond those currently allowed.

Senior writer Jeff Burlew reported Sunday that Tom Frick, director of the state Division of Environmental Assessment and Restoration, said new standards are “using the latest science and Florida-specific data to ensure Floridians can continue to safely eat Florida seafood and recreate in our waters.”

The state points out that the number of regulated pollutants would nearly double, from 43 to 82. The proposed new standards were developed with EPA-approved risk levels.

DEP Secretary Jon Stevenson sharply disagreed with Burlew's reporting. Like Frick, Stevenson said Florida “has some of the most comprehensive water quality standards in the country, including the most advanced numeric nutrient criteria in the entire nation.”

Still, red flags pop up within the numbers. Allowable levels of chloroform would rise significantly, though still comparable to EPA guidelines. Arsenic levels would be unchanged – but still 1,000 times higher than the EPA recommends for drinking water.

Dozens of toxins on the EPA's recommended criteria list would remain unregulated. That includes dioxin, the scourge of the Fenholloway River – the Taylor County waterway which our Legislature, in less enlightened times, once decreed to be an industrial stream, put there by Mother Nature to carry off pulp mill waste.

And the carcinogenic compound benzene would have its limit tripled under the DEP proposal. Although benzene is one of the things used in fracking, the DEP insists there's no connection.

Critics are rightly skeptical.

"All this is about is that somebody wants to pollute," Dr. Lonnie Draper, president of the Florida chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility, said of the new limits. "And in this case, it's probably the fracking industry."

DEP's proposals could go before the Florida Environmental Regulation Commission in September. The commission rejected the agency's previous recommendations in 2013.

With all due respect to the commission, its seven members are appointed by a governor who doesn't let DEP use terms like "global warming" or "climate change." Gov. Rick Scott's administration has funded Everglades cleanup and springs protection, but he's also the governor who's proposed camping and horse trails in Wakulla Springs – to mention just one example of monetizing state parks.

Scott wiped out the Department of Community Affairs, which controlled growth, and the rap on DEP has been that its initials stand for "Don't Expect Protection."

It's good that the state is reviewing and revising its limits, as required by the Clean Water Act. We'd feel a little safer, though, if Florida had a reputation for putting science and public health ahead of needs of the pulp and phosphate industries, big farming and developers.

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