



Opinion

Editorial: Polk group should pause the water war over the Peace River

By The Editorial Board

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Last week the Southwest Florida Water Management District issued a reminder of how soggy a summer — perhaps we should say year — it has been to this point in 2018.

Swiftmud, as the district is commonly known, reported in its weekly update on the water supply within the aquifer that the water level stood at the 82nd percentile, which is seven percentage points above the historic norm. Swiftmud also reported that the central region of its 16-county jurisdiction, which included Polk County, has recorded 47 inches of rain as of last week. That was 2 inches above the historic average to this point of the year, and put the region on track to easily surpass its historic annual average of 52 inches, especially with more than two months left in hurricane season.

We note this because one feeds of the other. The health of the aquifer, supplywise, depends on abundant rain. That's critical because the aquifer furnishes more than 80 percent of the fresh water we consume, most importantly for drinking, cooking and bathing. Regrettably, a significant portion — by some estimates roughly half — goes to irrigate our lawns.

We should be thankful for the rain and not take it for granted. Which means we should continue to conserve as much as possible and continue to explore ways to make the underground water supply go further, especially as Polk County's population grows.

Such is the mission of the Polk Regional Water Cooperative, a consortium of county government and 15 cities within Polk.

Yet the group has run into an obstacle to its planning: Swiftmud's approval of a request from the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Authority to double the volume of water it siphons from the Peace River. The authority — which represents Manatee, Charlotte, DeSoto and Sarasota counties — now takes 120 million gallons a day. It obtained permission to boost that to 258 million gallons over the next 50 years.

The Polk Cooperative went to court earlier this year to fight that. The group argues it needs 5 million to 10 million gallons a day for a network of small reservoirs that will function as aquifer recharge zones.

Last month a judge found merit in the cooperative's argument that Manasota Regional's petition would spoil its planning. The judge has also denied the authority's motions to dismiss the case. But the case has been referred for mediation, with a hearing set for next month.

Last week, Swiftmud's Executive Director Brian Armstrong attended the Polk Cooperative's meeting with a proposed compromise. As The Ledger reported, Armstrong wants the Polk group to table litigation and consider a plan to pull water from Hillsborough County. That water would become available through a process that elevates inland surface water levels after reclaimed water is injected into the salt water pocket of the aquifer near the Gulf Coast in southern Hillsborough.

Armstrong's plan sounds reasonable but depends on factors such as workability and cost. Thus, the Polk Cooperative members struck the appropriate posture: listen, consider, but don't agree until more is known. As Polk County Commissioner George Lindsey, chairman of the cooperative, told The Ledger, "If this is a viable, cost-effective solution that results in more water and less cost then it should be investigated. The consensus is we are willing to talk, however, the details always follow."

That's correct. Paraphrasing Winston Churchill, it's better to jaw-jaw than sue-sue. So, the cooperative should grant Armstrong's request: pause the lawsuit and wait for the details.