

Orange seeks bigger share of area's water

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David Damron
Sentinel Staff Writer

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Orange County wants a hefty increase in the amount of water it's allowed to pump from the region's dwindling underground water supply in the next 20 years -- a move that is infuriating neighboring counties that fear there won't be enough water left for them.

County officials say they need the water because of a burgeoning population that's growing faster than expected.

On March 7, Orange officials will ask the St. Johns River Water Management District to approve withdrawing up to 61.1 million gallons a day of groundwater in the next 20 years. The county also wants to pump up to 28.2 million gallons a day from underground supplies in Orange that fall within the South Florida Water Management District.

After 2010, Orange's total water withdrawals were scheduled to be 54 million gallons a day. The new requests pump that up to 89.3 million gallons a day gradually by 2016 -- a 65 percent increase. St. Johns water officials contend Orange's future water withdrawals didn't need to be as restricted as once thought because the underground water supply can handle the extra withdrawal. So the district's governing board is poised to approve the new request.

But several governments are ready to fight.

They argue that Orange's water pumping could dry lakes, wetlands and springs across the region because more water pumped for human demands leaves less water for ecosystems. And it would mean those areas and their utilities would have to find more costly alternative sources, such as desalination or taking water from rivers and lakes.

"It was a bit of a shock to all of us when we came to find out Orange County had made such an enormous request," said John Cirello, Seminole County's environmental-services director. "We're growing as fast as Orange County is growing. If our water is restricted, so is our growth."

Opposition from Osceola, Seminole and Lake counties to Orange's request could lead to legal hearings and long-predicted water wars. Orange and Orlando flirted with a protracted legal battle two years ago when the Orlando Utilities Commission wanted to increase its water withdrawals. That battle was averted, in part, when the two utilities agreed to pump surface water from Taylor Creek in southeast Orange.

Orange officials said they negotiated with St. Johns officials for two years to make their request "environmentally sound." Orange County has to use more treated wastewater for irrigation and meet a first-ever requirement to have an alternative water source online by 2013. Orange's participation in the Taylor Creek project satisfies that requirement.

"People are now worrying, 'Is my neighbor going to get the last drop of water?' " Orange's lead water attorney Anthony Cotter said. "But we're not asking for the last drop of water."

In 2000, St. Johns officials gave Orange a permit through 2010 to pump 47 million gallons a day. Between 2010 and 2020, the county was supposed to reduce its withdrawals to 34 million gallons a day.

Water-district officials said the decreased amount was set when water experts were unsure how the underground water supply was being affected by Central Florida's increasing water demands. At the time, Orange officials were told they could ask for more if future studies showed supplies were not being severely overdrawn.

St. Johns experts predict that with Orange's new request, the water table could decline by up to a foot while the deeper underground reservoir, the Floridan Aquifer, could drop by up to 3 feet. They maintain that's not dangerous.

Seminole's acting County Manager Don Fisher wrote St. Johns officials this month that the predictions underestimate the real effects of Orange's withdrawals. Seminole is seeking an additional 10 million gallons a day, but Fisher maintains the district has told him the county will need to use alternative sources, such as the St. Johns River.

Fisher said he fears Orange's withdrawals will harm the environment and allow saltwater to intrude into Seminole's drinking water wells. He wrote to district officials that the water table in Seminole could drop more than a foot.

"That's approaching a level of concern," said Doug Shaw, a hydrologist with The Nature Conservancy.

But St. Johns' officials said Orange's request doesn't cross a dangerous line.

"We are reaching our long-term sustainability limits," said Hal Wilkening, director of water resources at St. Johns. "Orange County would like to get all its water needs from the ground, but what they are agreeing to in this permit is much less than that."

Leesburg also awaits word from St. Johns on its own water permit, which seeks 16.4 million gallons a day for the next 20 years, up from its current permit for 9.13 million gallons.

Leesburg Mayor Bob Lovell said Orange's permit will force Lake cities to seek alternative supplies and could increase the cost. "I don't think there is any way you can stop growth -- it's just going to cost a lot more to put the growth in."

Lovell is on the Lake County Water Alliance, an advisory group of city and county leaders, which recently recommended that Lake County commissioners consider challenging Orange's request.

Osceola County plans to guard its natural resources, said County Commission Chairman Paul Owen.

"Orange County has had a tremendous amount of development. They need to step up to the plate and not try to tap resources in other counties," Owen said. "But they want to take the easy way out."

Orange expects to need as much as 117.5 million gallons of water a day by 2025, and what it can't pump out of the ground, county officials hope to make up for with surface waters and using treated wastewater for irrigation.

"We didn't get everything we wanted in this," Orange County Administrator Ajit Lalchandani said.

Water experts warn that underground sources of water are reaching precarious thresholds. There is much scientific debate about when pumping more water out of the ground causes harm to environmental jewels.

"You can literally lose them. The pressure, the power to operate the springs is from the aquifer," said Seminole Soil and Water Conservation District chairman Michael Barr. "If you draw it down too far, they're gone. It's not something that can come back. We don't know the science as far as how to make it come back."

St. Johns' Wilkening said that will not happen. "We wouldn't have recommended [the permit] if we thought it was going to cause a problem."

Daphne Sashin, Nin-Hai Tseng and Sandra Pedicini of the Sentinel staff contributed to this report. David Damron can be reached at ddamron@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5311.