

Dear Ms. Llewelyn,

Please accept these written comments in addition to the Environmental Protection Commission of Hillsborough County's (EPC) verbal comments at the November 4, 2015 Workshop in Tampa regarding the Morris Bridge Sink WUP Application submitted by the Southwest Florida Water Management District. As our General Counsel, Richard Tschantz stated at the workshop, the EPC has serious concerns regarding the environmental impacts expected to occur resulting from the proposed water withdrawals requested in this application. The EPC has jurisdiction over impacts to wetlands and other surface waters within Hillsborough County.

Pumping Tests at Morris Bridge Sink

During extreme drought conditions, Tampa Bay Water, the Regional Water Supply Authority, installed emergency pumps in the Morris Bridge Sink over a 10 week period from May 30, 2000 to August 14, 2000 in order to augment the flows to the Hillsborough River. An average of 6.7 mgd were pumped from the sink over that time period. Drawdowns for that time period in the Morris Bridge Sink (MBS) were 7 ft. Seven hundred-fifty feet away at Nursery Sink drawdowns were 2.6 ft. and since there is a direct connection from the Sink to the Surficial and Upper Floridan Aquifer, drawdowns in the upper Floridan were 4 ft. Thirteen residential water supply wells in the surrounding area ran dry and needed to be mitigated by Tampa Bay Water.

In 2009 the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) conducted a pumping test at the MBS for 30 days from April 13, 2009 to May 13, 2009. Pumping was maintained at a constant rate of 4 mgd during this time period. Tampa Bay Water continued pumping the Sink at 4 mgd to 6 mgd for an additional nine days as part of an emergency order due to drought conditions at the time. Drawdowns at the MBS over this testing period were 2.16 ft. Wetland impacts were unable to be recorded since prolonged drought conditions resulted in all of the surrounding wetlands being dry at that time.

Unlike the pumping tests, the current WUP application for 2 mgd with a peak average of 3.9 mgd can be open ended and continuous as long as certain conditions exist. This is the same time period (as seen by the 2009 pumping test) where the wetland systems and hydrology in the area are most at risk and subject to prolonged impacts. Again this is due to the direct connection between the Sink and the upper Floridan. If the permit is issued, limitations on pumping during drought conditions must be placed in the permit to avoid irreparable damage to the environment.

Wetland Monitoring Plan

Although the proposed wetland monitoring plan appears well thought out (Att. F of the application), there are no proposed mechanisms or triggers in place to address wetland impacts that may occur. The Soils section of the Monitoring Plan (page 5 of 15 in Attachment F) clearly indicates that one cause of soil subsidence is lowered groundwater and that subsidence to wetland soils can cause serious impacts to trees and wetland health including, root exposure, root rot and tree fall. (Worsten et al, 1997; Shih et al, 1997; Reedy, et al, 2006.) The report goes on to say that "tree fall from root exposure is not an uncommon occurrence in the northern Tampa Bay area Cypress wetlands where such soil losses have occurred". Such impacts that occur should be clearly defined in the permit and should trigger the cessation of pumping. EPC opposes the issuance of this permit. However, if the Department's intent is to issue the permit, strong conditions must be placed therein to address the cessation of pumping at the MBS and the mitigation of wetland impacts that do occur. Since the EPC has jurisdiction over wetland impacts in Hillsborough County, we request that monitoring reports required under the permit also be required to be sent to the EPC.

Alternatives

There are alternatives for augmentation to the Lower Hillsborough River that do not have the same potential for harm to pristine wetland systems such as the proposed quantities from the MBS have. See the technical report submitted at the Workshop by Michael S. Flannery, former Chief Environmental Scientist of the SWFWMD entitled, “**Technical Concerns That Support a Recommendation for the Re-evaluation of the Minimum Flows Recovery Strategy for the Lower Hillsborough River**”, dated November 4, 2015. (The November 4, 2015 report is a slightly updated version of the same report submitted to the SWFWMD on November 7, 2014.) Mr. Flannery’s report states, “The District has been providing minimum flows from the Tampa Bypass Canal to the lower river since 2008 and modifications to the diversion facilities at Sulphur Springs were completed in the spring of 2012. Diversions from these two sources have either met or come close to meeting the adopted minimum flows for the lower river on many days since the spring of 2012.” “Given the large increases in permitted water use from the reservoir/canal system and conditions of that use, it is the conclusion of this report that the Tampa Bypass Canal should be the second source in priority for meeting the minimum flows for the Lower Hillsborough River.”

Conclusion

The Department is legally bound to deny any permit where there is not the necessary “Reasonable Assurance”, **at the time of permit issuance**, that the withdrawals will not result in adverse environmental impacts. The Department and the Water Management Districts should strive to prevent harm to natural systems without the need for artificial maintenance by pumped groundwater augmentation, especially in pristine and sensitive environments. While the EPC opposes issuance of the permit, in the event it is issued we request that the DEP insert appropriate conditions noted above. Additionally and separate from the permit process, we request that DEP also work with SWFWMD to pursue a mechanism that requires the City of Tampa to further reduce water supply withdrawals from the Hillsborough River during low flow conditions and drought and purchase more water from the Regional Authority, Tampa Bay Water. Please include the EPC as an interested party to be noticed of the Department’s Agency Action in this application. Thank you for your consideration of the input from all interested parties to this application.

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Executive Director

Environmental Protection Commission

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