

## LETTERS

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### **Trouble in the brine**

Re Dinah Pulver's series of reports about water in The NewsJournal last week: Reverse osmosis water treatment has been proposed to remove contaminants such as dissolved salt from river water to make it pure enough for human use. This process could effectively clean river water for cities and town use. Reverse osmosis works well but it is expensive because of the electricity required for the process. Low pressure distillation, also a good process, is expensive for similar reasons. These processes may have been described in earlier articles on water supplies.

The problem these technologies have, as do almost all processes, is that there is always a waste product. In the case here, it is a concentrated saline effluent that has to be disposed of in a responsible way. Plants near the coastline run the effluent out to sea with a pipeline on the sea bottom. In the middle of the state, say near the St. Johns River, that requires building a pipeline from the treatment plant to the ocean or Gulf of Mexico. Pipelines have capital costs for construction, rights of way, etc., and continuing costs for inspection and maintenance. Salty water spills have long-term effects. Nothing may grow where the salt accumulates and the salt eventually leaches into the shallow groundwater resource. The waste effluent cannot be put back into the river since that compounds the problem and changes the river ecology.

The problem of disposing of the waste effluent brine in terms of cost or pollution needs to be further explored.

**BILL SWINDELL** New Smyrna Beach

### **Conserve but no crisis**

I have long valued Dinah Pulver's contributions. However, if the purpose of the extensive coverage in the Sunday installment of the series is to convince the reader that "the water debate has become the water crisis," I believe that coverage falls far wide of the mark. As the late Rear Adm. Grace Hopper used to say "One good data point is worth a thousand expert opinions," and this article is lacking in relevant data. What is offered to convince us that the aquifer is running dry is a graph attributed to the U.S. Geological Survey that presents the water height at Alamana well from May 1936 to September 2002. That graph invites several observations: The most relevant data from September 2002 to the present is missing. From the initial entry of 29.7 feet to the final entry of September 2002, the water level has diminished by 0.6 feet or about 2 percent in 65 years — hardly the basis for a cry of crisis. The seasonal variation of about 3 to 5 feet is far larger than the long-term change of 0.6 feet. Indeed, my eyeballs tell me that if you had decided only to show the data from this graph from May 1981 to September 2002, rather than headlining this chart "Groundwater levels dropping," the appropriate headline would have been "Groundwater levels unchanged over 20-year period."

The emphasis on conservation in this series is undoubtedly deserved. However, even here, I believe the comment that "Every community has that group of people who have enough money that water is not the issue" belittles the impact of price upon consumption. Indeed, during my two-year tenure as a board member of the Water Authority of Volusia, I concluded that pricing disparities across Volusia County municipalities are a major obstacle to any sort of unified action. WAV and the regional water management district studies indicated that the municipalities of West Volusia County were most in need of additional water resources in the foreseeable future. However, residents of Ponce Inlet were paying \$4.95 per thousand gallons of water plus sewer charges that almost double that water charge, while Deltona provided its water at \$1.27 per thousand with most of its residents not subject to sewer charges. Deltona is not at fault for its low price for water. Because the water quality is very good from the aquifer supplying the West Volusia water suppliers, it costs them very little to provide the water. Because the state prohibits municipalities from making profits on their enterprise programs, they sell the water very cheaply. The Legislature needs to allow water to be priced at its long-term replacement value rather than based upon its immediate costs of production.

I suspect that a low price on water encourages excessive consumption — a view documented in a 2005 study by Florida's water management districts. It seems to me that every water supplier in the area has a

water meter on each of its single-family residences. Therefore, it should take very little effort for each of the water suppliers to aggregate its water meter readings to document the average use by its single-family residences. Then, we would have data with which to determine the effect of price upon consumption in Volusia County. When I was a member of WAV, I proposed on several occasions that WAV request each of its member water suppliers to aggregate its meter records so that it could report the number of single-family users and their monthly water consumption. The WAV board showed little interest, but I still believe these would be useful, inexpensive data for WAV to collect.

In any case, though I believe we must keep an eye on aquifer levels, neither the regional water management district or your article has provided data to convince me that the crisis level is anywhere in sight. When, and if, that crisis appears, I suggest that unified county control, similar to that provided by the Jacksonville Electric Authority, offers the most efficient and equitable model.

**GARY COMFORT Ponce Inlet**

### **And not 1 drop more**

Dinah Pulver's special report about the stuff that comes out of our faucets is more timely than Santa Claus and more relevant than Christmas trees. Especially when on Dec. 17, the St. Johns River Water Management District gave Edgewater its own gift by voicing "no objections" to adding about 17,000 new people to the city courtesy of Donald Mears, developer. The hitch? There's only enough water for the new people from "Phase I," so Edgewater will have to find "alternate water sources" for the rest of them. You see, there are no houses around here for sale, so the city is ordering 8,500 new ones.

**SANDRA WALTERS Enterprise**

### **Money, plain and simple**

If a lie is told often enough (WMDs or trickle-down economics), it soon becomes the "truth." A Dec. 2 letter writer provides a prime example, stating that if the long-term capital gains tax is done away with for 2009, it will help bring the market back and people will invest more and keep it for at least a year. I've been investing in the stock market since the 1960s and have earned most of my income from the market since 1994. The first rule of good investing is buy when you think it's right and sell when you think it's right and don't let taxes enter into the decision. If you can keep the stock another three months to get the longterm capital gains rate, then it's not the time to sell anyway.

Money is money, if it's from investments, salary or hourly wages, it all buys the same amount of goods. Why should my children pay a tax rate of 25 percent to 30 percent when I only pay 15 percent on the same income? When the market is right, the investors will come back in if the tax rate is zero or 60 percent. Where else can investors earn from 6 percent to 10 percent return on their money?

Believe me, no one buys a stock because they like the product the company makes, or the CEO, or because they want to "keep the company solvent." They buy to make money plain and simple. All income, from any source should be taxed the same. The greatest investor of all time, Warren Buffett, feels the same way, so I feel I'm in pretty good company.

**LEON M. BLYTHE Edgewater**



**EDITORIAL (12/29/08)**

## **Facing water's challenge**

### **Cooperation holds the key to meeting water demands**

In Florida talk about water tends to start with a fundamental premise: Wasting it is a bad idea. Residents are frequently encouraged to conserve the public supply through measures like installing water-friendly landscaping and low-flow shower heads, irrigating lawns less often and turning off the tap during tooth-brushing.

These worthy appeals to individual behavior lose weight, however, when considered against broader water use practices. Local cities pay lip service to conservation, and no wonder — half of them use proceeds from water sales to subsidize general city operations. Few enforce water rules seriously. Intercity squabbling in Volusia County hampers efforts to cooperate on water use.

Many local families — like the Dobbersteins of Port Orange, profiled last week in The News-Journal's Got Water? series — take significant steps to save water. And Lindsay Roberts, executive director of the Water Authority of Volusia, urges more residents to follow suit, urging them to consider the “water cost” of everything they buy and providing guidance on easy ways to retrofit plumbing fixtures and sprinkler systems to lower water use. Some water utilities offer rebates to help homeowners replace old fixtures with more efficient ones and increase rates for customers who use the most water.

Cities can get into conservation mode by repairing or replacing leaky old pipes — DeLand and Daytona Beach estimate they lose about 10 percent of their treated water before it reaches customers. And local governments can become tougher on water restrictions — most violators get notices, not fines.

To its credit, the St. Johns River Water Management District plans to allocate more money for enforcement next year. All these measures are important.

But still, local residents and businesses have to wonder: Who are they benefiting when they control their personal water use? If the excess water helps keep Volusia and Flagler counties green and low-cost, high quality potable water in good supply —those are goals almost everyone can appreciate.

But what's the point if individual restraint is only freeing up inexpensive groundwater to be allocated to developers to draw more homebuyers here to further strain the public resource?

What's missing is a long-term view of water use, and better regional efforts to coordinate, manage and

conserve the resource.

By 2025, water experts predict that Volusia and Flagler demands will have exceeded the supply of inexpensive, clean groundwater. If anything, that estimate is optimistic. Time and again, local utilities have shot past estimates of usage, pulling more water from the ground to fill bathtubs and water lawns than anyone predicted. That's in large part due to the way water is allocated at the regional level. Cities with a financial stake in their water supply rush to obtain consumptive-use permits, beating out other cities and staking claims to well fields far outside their borders.

As a result, utilities in the county are still more focused on consumption than conservation, speeding the day when utilities must turn to desalination or surface water, such as the St. Johns River, to quench the area's thirst for clean drinking water.

The water authority was created with the aim of eliminating that heedless competition. But it also was created with fatal flaws that made it toothless against city water grabs. The best recourse: Go back to voters — the same ones to whom water officials are preaching conservation — and win approval for a water authority with *real* authority to set the course for water consumption in Volusia County. Individual conservation helps. But it will take a larger effort to ensure a supply of fresh drinking water while protecting the natural treasures that make this area unique.

**What's missing is a long-term view of water use, and better regional efforts to coordinate, manage and conserve the resource.**