

Withlacoochee River advocates brainstorm restoration plan

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Citrus Chronicle 4-7-22



Matthew Rook / Chronicle Photo Editor

A “war room” of advocates for the Withlacoochee River assembled to start strategizing how to save their portion of the local waterway from further harm. Roughly two dozen people – from river residents and experts, to government and water-restoration representatives – met the evening of Tuesday, April 5, at the Yankeetown-Inglis Woman’s Club. They answered the rally call from Withlacoochee Aquatic Restoration Inc. (WAR) to brainstorm a game plan to rehabilitate the river.

“There are a lot of very bright people here,” WAR president Dan Hilliard told attendees. “You do have muscle, you do have a brain, you do have ideas, and we’re here to work on that; we want feedback, we want ideas.”

Since it was founded in 1984 under the original title of Withlacoochee Area Residents, WAR and its members have fought for the river’s health, especially its most downstream section in between Citrus and Levy counties – the Lower Withlacoochee River.

In 2012, WAR and its donors paid for an extensive study on the Lower Withlacoochee, which stretches from Lake Rousseau to the river’s mouth with the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown.

Studies also spanned into Lake Rousseau and as far upriver as the Withlacoochee River’s junction with the Rainbow River near Dunnellon.

Findings published in July 2021 by Wetland Solutions Inc. showed there were “a variety of hydrological, physical, chemical, biological and structural impairments” to the water system because of around 120 years of human nature.

As a result, invasive vegetation has flourished while native fisheries and other river habitats have either suffered or died off. This report and its conclusions confirmed what those who use the Lower Withlacoochee or live alongside it have experienced over the years, and they want those in power to do something.

“When we first got here...we just saw different life...lots of different things, and it’s really sad to see it

change and get mucky,” Liz Westers said at Tuesday’s meeting about when she and husband, John, moved to the area in December 2015. “To me, it’s so important to come up with a campaign and get people involved.”

“I’ve seen this river go from being my piece of heaven to almost my piece of hell,” added Tommy Hines, chairman of the Yankeetown Planning and Zoning Commission who’s been fishing on the river since 1978. “I’m sick and tired of seeing it, and there are things that can be done.”

Hilliard said a conference between the WAR board and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection is being scheduled to discuss how to move forward with the \$20 million-\$150 million in solutions Wetland Solutions pitched in its report to restore the Lower Withlacoochee. “It’s something worth preserving,” Hilliard said. “It’s the golden egg, and we need to stop killing the goose.”

Hilliard also said WAR is in need of board members to continue its fight. Interested? Visit WAR’s website at warinonline.com.

WAR members Steven Scannell and Brian Nemeth moderated Tuesday’s roundtable discussion to help identify the problems, come up with remedies and mull over how to get the attention of government officials.

“It’s not right, and I don’t think the right buttons have been pushed ... and we need to push some buttons right now,” Nemeth said. “We’re coming up with any ideas we can come up with. ...We’ve got make this work; it’s time.”

At the end of Tuesday’s gathering, WAR board members voted for Scannell to explore the cost to develop a Listserv, a computer-software program used to maintain online discussions through email. Scannell recommended a Listserv because it could help WAR and others in similar groups come together to create a foundation of ideas that can grow with each conversation into potential action. “We need to get organized, and organize our support,” he said, “and, looking at the people in this room, it shouldn’t be too hard.”

Many on Tuesday pointed blame at the government-funded herbicide spraying operations to kill invasive and congestive aquatic plants in the Withlacoochee River and Lake Rousseau. Along with being fearful of what chemicals are in the herbicides, those at the meeting also expressed concerns with the how the dead plants either settle or resurface to create layers of muck that drift and collect in the Lower Withlacoochee.

“It looks like a golf green,” said Bobby Varner, who moved to the area about three years ago from Mississippi. WAR’s funded study on the Lower Withlacoochee also blamed the unfinished Cross-Florida Barge Canal for starving the river section of its natural water flow to maintain healthy ecosystems. Lake Rousseau feeds the first half of the Lower Withlacoochee River, which then empties into the barge canal. However, the second half of the lower river is dependent on flows from a canal bypass.

If efforts aren’t made to improve the water quality upriver, some in Tuesday’s group noted, any cleanups of the Lower Withlacoochee would be fruitless in the long term. “If you don’t clean Lake Rousseau up,” Varner said, “the Withlacoochee River’s not going to be cleaned up because that’s where it’s all coming from.”

Varner and Ninon Roy founded the Lake Rousseau Restoration nonprofit to, among other efforts, pay contractors to remove the lake’s unwanted vegetation mechanically when there’s funds available. For more information, visit lakerousseaur restoration.org. “If we can harvest the grasses ... and take it out of lake, then at least we’re getting something done,” Varner said. “A lot of people don’t like what’s going on, but nobody seems like they want to help.”

Representatives from Save Crystal River Inc. and its contractor Sea & Shoreline were invited by WAR to share how their King's Bay Restoration Project has ridded the bay of harmful vegetation, and replaced it with water-cleansing and habitat-building eelgrasses.

Doug Neal, a riverfront resident who's been coming to the Yankeetown area for roughly 30 years, testified to the project's success. "If we can replicate here what you guys have done there that would be a great success," he said. "That's what I'd love to see." No matter what solutions are proposed, they have to get the buy-in from the public before lawmakers will back them. "If you're going to get anything done with the legislation or anything," Hines said, "you have to get the support of the people. Because if you don't ... you're not going to get it."

WAR member John Adams suggested WAR invest in the production of inexpensive and targeted television ads to stoke constituents and put pressure on local, state and federal legislators. "You don't have to spend a fortune to make a lot of stuff happen," he said. "Votes are stronger than money."

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