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Editorial: Lawmakers, stand up to DeSantis and start healing a mangled river

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Rodman Dam is pictured along the Ocklawaha River in 2020.

For Florida's leaders, a few controversies stand as bright-line tests: There is a wrong side and a right side, with little gray in between. The fate of the Ocklawaha River, strangled for six decades by an ill-conceived dam just north of the Ocala National Forest, is one of those issues. And once again, Gov. Ron DeSantis and a misguided minority of Florida lawmakers are on the wrong side.

DeSantis' recent veto of $6.25 million to begin the restoration of the river constitutes a dangerous gamble. The George Kirkpatrick Dam, named after the late state senator who was its fiercest defender, is in perilously poor repair — to the point of endangering lives if it fails. On an environmental, economic and political level, it's becoming increasingly clear

that the dam needs to go. What was DeSantis hoping to accomplish by delaying this project nearly a year? And what is the Legislature prepared to do about it?

Environmental vandalism

The Ocklawaha River rambles more than 200 miles, from the north shore of Lake Apopka to the St. Johns River and thus to the sea. But it was mangled in the mid-1960s, through one of the worst environmental travesties Florida has ever seen. In this state, that's saying something.

The Cross Florida Barge Canal, as designed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, was something Florida and national leaders long aspired to. It was intended to carve a shortcut canal across the state, allowing boat traffic to travel from the east coast to the Gulf of Mexico without going around the Florida Keys. The decision to dam the Ocklawaha at the northern tip of the Ocala National Forest is one of the few desecrations that made it into reality before President Richard Nixon shut the project down for good.

The dam created a new artificial lake that spanned Marion and Putnam counties, covering more than 9,500 acres. Dubbed the Rodman Reservoir, it quickly became a favored spot for sportfishers and boaters, ranking high on the list of bass-fishing spots. The creation of the reservoir also spawned a lot of new waterfront property.

But 20 free-flowing springs disappeared beneath the waters of the reservoir. By restricting the flow of fresh water, the dam contributed to an increased intrusion of saltwater in the St. Johns River. Environmentalists say it also significantly curbed the growth of eelgrass and other vegetation that provides spawning beds for fish — and meals for Florida's beloved manatees.

On an environmental level, there can be no doubt: Restoring the Ocklawaha River to its natural course would significantly improve water quality, boost fish and wildlife diversity and help protect Northeast Florida's supply of fresh drinking water. That was the easy conclusion of a study group funded by the Pew Charitable Trust, which released its report in April during the Legislature's annual session.

Dollars and sense

But the report still managed to surprise many. The group — which included many former state scientists who had extensive experience with the reservoir and dam controversy — concluded that breaching the dam would quickly show an economic return as well.

That torpedoes one of the main arguments of the dam's defenders, who insist that restoring the river's flow would wreak significant havoc on businesses that depend on fishing-related tourism. The report acknowledged that in the short term, there would be a drop in tourism

— and the state would have to cover close to $100 million in restoration costs. They even counted the lost property value for 16 owners who now have reservoir waterfront.

That should be counterbalanced, the study argued, by the value of the jobs that would be created for the restoration effort. Post-restoration, the river would still support a thriving — probably even more varied — fishery all the way up to the Lower St. Johns River basin, along with increased opportunities for eco-tourism. The re-emergence of more than a dozen springs would create more recreational opportunities.

It would take about five years to catch up to the money spent on restoration, or lost due to the reservoir's demise, the report estimates. Within 10 years, the economic return from the restoration would likely exceed the current benefit of the reservoir by as much as double.

People who want to keep the dam and reservoir dispute these numbers as too optimistic. But even if the restoration just breaks even, that should be enough, given the environmental benefits.

High-hazard delay

There's one more compelling reason to move forward with the restoration: The Kirkpatrick Dam is in sorry shape, with an estimated $4 million backlog of deferred maintenance and repairs. A 2021 inspection of the dam's structural integrity found multiple problems, including corroded underwater hardware, leaking seals and cracking concrete. Parts of the structure are no longer supported by sand that's eroded away, and the spillway is clogged with "heavy woody debris."

If the dam were to fail, the 2021 report concluded, the resulting surge of water would damage millions of dollars worth of property — and potentially endanger human lives if the area flooded without warning. That report found no imminent danger of the dam failing. But the engineers who prepared it noted that much of its structure could not be inspected. As a result, the Kirkpatrick Dam's status was elevated to "high hazard" on a national catalog of significant dams.

That reality probably inspired the Legislature to finally appropriate money for the Ocklawaha restoration. It wasn't as fast as many hoped: Instead of $15 million that the Senate originally wanted, lawmakers set aside $6.25 million. And it spread the restoration over 10 years, rather than four as originally planned. But the intent was clear: It was time to avoid the hazards that the 2021 failure analysis detailed, and reach for the economic and environmental benefits outlined in the 2025 report.

Did DeSantis not see either of these reports? How will he justify his decision if the dam does fail and lives are lost?

Almost certainly, lawmakers are going through DeSantis' long list of budget vetoes looking for likely candidates to override. This project should be among those considered: The Kirkpatrick Dam won't be getting any safer, particularly if it is repeatedly pounded by storms. The sooner the river's natural flow is restored, the better.

Those who scoff at the project's chances of success should take a look at another, even bigger restoration project. The Kissimmee River — once trashed by another foolhardy canal project that helped destroy thousands of acres of wetlands and dumped heavy loads of pollutants into Lake Okeechobee — is almost back to its full, twisting glory.

Looking at the victory of the Kissimmee, we have to wonder: Why wouldn't DeSantis want to claim a similar environmental win for himself? He didn't, and so the credit for this project is up for grabs. We hope lawmakers have the sense to seize the moment.

The Orlando Sentinel Editorial Board consists of Opinion Editor Krys Fluker, Executive Editor Roger Simmons and Viewpoints Editor Jay Reddick. Contact us at insight@orlandosentinel.com