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DeSantis has said he supports 'God's design' for Florida. This veto said otherwise | Opinion

By Mark Woods July 2, 2025

I was all set to write about how in the first six months of 2025, a series of years-long efforts came to fruition in and around Northeast Florida — leading to monumental victories for the future of land and water in our region.

- To the west of Jacksonville, we had one of the largest land conservation deals ever in this part of the state. Shepherded by the North Florida Land Trust and approved by Gov. Ron DeSantis, the conservation of more than 78,000 privately-owned acres achieved a years-long goal of closing the final major gap in the Ocala-to-Osceola Wildlife Corridor.
- To the north of Jacksonville, The Conservation Fund reached a $60 million deal to buy property near the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, ending years of concerns about mining next to the largest blackwater wetland in North America, a place that could be on its way to becoming a World Heritage Site and — particularly significant for Northeast Florida — has always been the headwaters of the St. Marys and Suwanee rivers.
- Finally, to top it all off, to the south of Jacksonville, the state of Florida was set to do something that would allow the Ocklawaha River to flow freely again — not only restoring what was once considered one of America's most beautiful waterways, but improving the health of the St. Johns River from Palatka to Jacksonville.

After more than 50 years, a section of the Rodman Dam was finally going to come down.

It was in the state budget, put there by Republican legislators, supported by a broad, bipartisan coalition.

And then, on June 30, the governor vetoed it.

So here we are. Two big steps forward, one step back to preserving an aging dam and ailing fishing pond.

'We're just trying to go back to God's design'

It's interesting to go back to when DeSantis last ran for governor and see one of his quotes about restoring natural Florida.

"You're basically taking a state and you're making sure it has adequate plumbing," he said, "because we had how God made it, and man kind of changed that and it created some problems, so we're just trying to go back to God's design."

He said this about the Everglades.

When it comes to the Ocklawaha, and the springs and forests covered by the damming of the St. Johns River's largest tributary, and the damage done to the river it flows into, that apparently is another story.

Never mind how God made it, or how man clogged the plumbing, creating and exacerbating myriad problems.

Veto $6.25 million to begin the process of restoring one of the oldest, most storied rivers in Florida.

Sen. Jason Brodeur (R-Sanford), whose district includes part of the St. Johns River, led the legislative push this session. After the governor's veto, Brodeur said: "I remain committed to Ocklawaha River restoration. This is a water resources project of state and national significance that would strengthen the Florida Wildlife Corridor, be the largest springs restoration project currently in the state, and reconnect three rivers and Silver Springs, all while generating hundreds of jobs and millions in economic benefits for Putnam and Marion counties."

A dam and its connected water in decline

In the middle of the dam-building frenzy of the last century, hundreds of dams were built for electricity or irrigation. This dam was unusual. It was built to create a cross-state barge canal, an ill-fated project that never was completed, turning the wall that stopped the Ocklawaha into what Audubon Magazine once described as "the only dam in the nation without even an *alleged* purpose."

Its purpose became its massive reservoir, which became known for bass fishing.

That is why the dam is still standing and still has supporters who have a governor's ear, telling him to ignore the science that supports taking down the dam, ignore the sportsmen who have told him the fishing will be even better when the dam comes down, ignore the polls that show public opinion in Putnam County has shifted through the years, with a majority of residents now saying it's time.

In the decades of the dam's existence — as is often the case with dams — the health of the reservoir and the connected rivers has declined.

And then there's the dam itself.

Dams have a lifespan. They eventually need to be repaired or torn down. And either option comes with a cost. That's true for the one officially named Kirkpatrick Dam. Doing nothing isn't a viable long-term plan. It's a potentially dangerous one.

In 2022, an inspection report found that the Rodman Dam was not at risk of impending failure — but it reclassified the dam, from low hazard to high hazard.

According to FEMA, high hazard applies to "a dam in which failure or mis-operation is expected to result in loss of life and may also cause significant economic losses, including

damages to downstream property, or critical infrastructure, environmental damage, or disruption of lifeline facilities."

It makes more sense — not just environmentally, but economically — to take down the dam than to leave it up.

That's what Florida TaxWatch said in 2022. The nonpartisan government watchdog group issued a report supporting the breaching of the dam and recommending that the legislature appropriate funding for a partial restoration of the Ocklawaha.

"To do otherwise," it said, "would be a dam shame."

This year the Legislature finally appropriated funding to start that process. The governor stopped it. And that *is* a shame.

This could have capped off quite a six months for this region, stringing together monumental conservation efforts from the Ocklawaha to the Okefenokee.

But it isn't the end of this dam story.

"While disappointed, we are by no means deterred," St. Johns Riverkeeper Lisa Rinaman said in a message to supporters. "Restoration has only been delayed, not defeated. … We are confident that the facts will eventually prevail over the misguided politics that have prevented restoration for over 50 years."