



## FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

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### Action Alert

This is “make it or break it” time for restoration of the Ocklawaha River!

We’ve never been so close to success in a decades-long effort to restore the Ocklawaha River and 15,000 acres of floodplain forest that were lost or damaged when the river was dammed in 1968 as part of the disastrous Cross Florida Barge Canal project. FNPS is one of 60 organizations that comprise the Free the Ocklawaha Coalition, and this is the make-it-or-break-it moment when we need to show the Governor, Legislature and FDEP that citizens want to restore the Ocklawaha by breaching the Kirkpatrick Dam. The St Johns River Water Management District is coordinating an online public survey to gauge support for restoration and we are asking you to take a few moments to complete the survey and let Florida decisionmakers know you support restoration of a free-flowing Ocklawaha.

A link to the survey and information to help you answer the survey questions are provided below. Even if you have never experienced the natural beauty and ecological splendor of the undisturbed, natural reaches of the Ocklawaha, we will explain why restoration is so important to the entire Ocklawaha-Silver Springs-Lower St Johns River system, and to Florida’s environmental and economic future.

#### **A VERY Brief Recap of the History**

The Ocklawaha River is the largest tributary to the St. Johns River. The Ocklawaha and its major tributary – the Silver River and Silver Springs - were renowned for their scenic splendor and astounding wildlife. But early visionaries who believed they could improve on nature turned their attentions to creating a shipping channel that would link the Gulf of Mexico with the Atlantic Ocean and allow ships to bypass the long journey around the Florida peninsula. Their vision morphed into the Cross Florida Barge Canal project. Much more detailed accounts of the lengthy history of this project and the broad spectrum of environmental and economic benefit can be found at <https://www.freetheocklawaha.com/>.

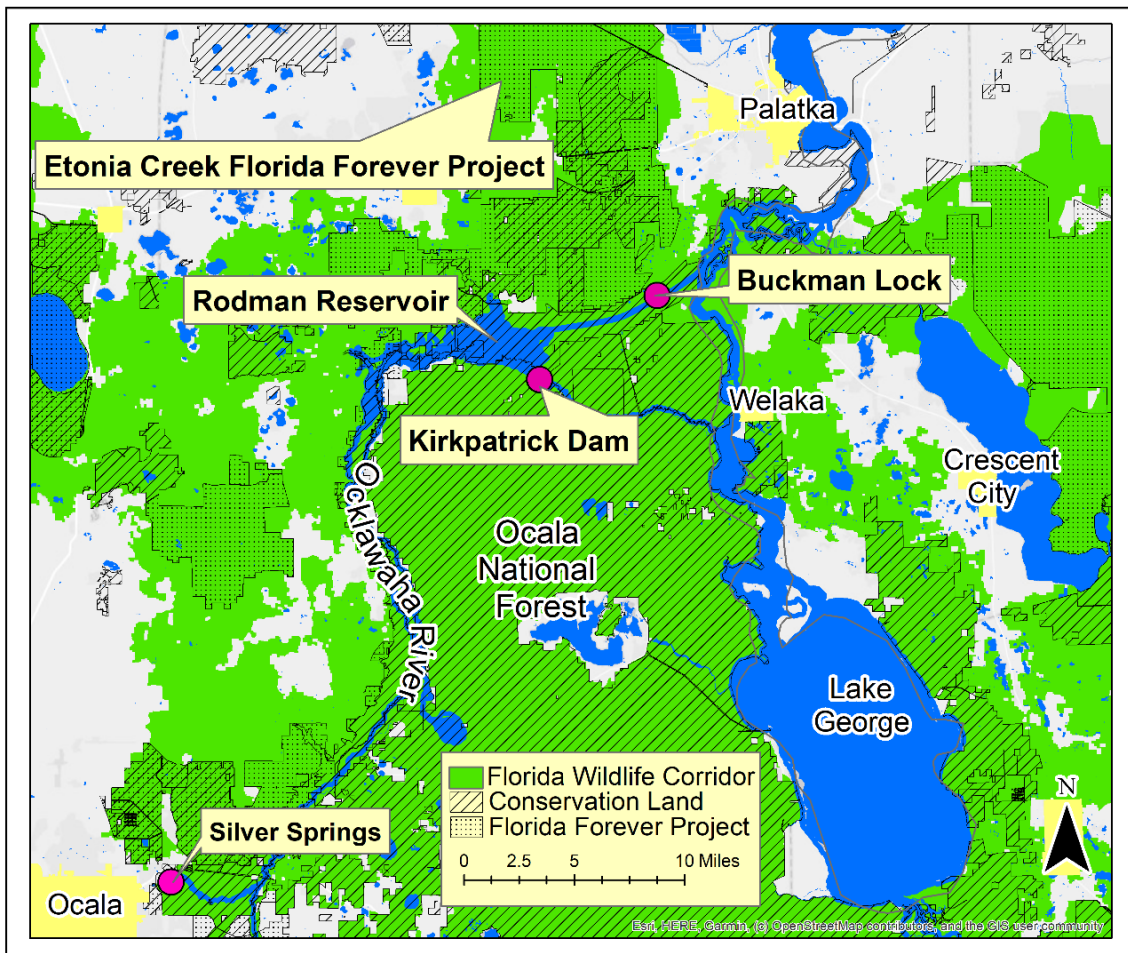
In short, the immense environmental calamity that would have resulted from completion of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project was largely averted. But some remnants remain. On the positive side, we have the 70,000-acre, 110-mile long Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, which is described as “one of the nation’s largest incomplete public works projects” on the Florida State Parks website. It’s a linear park aligned along what would have been the footprint of the Barge Canal and it is an environmental and recreational jewel. On the negative side, one segment of the Barge Canal was completed. Construction of the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam and Buckman Lock system was completed in

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1968 and impounded the lower Ocklawaha River, resulting in creation of the Rodman Reservoir (see Overview Map below). Calls to breach the dam and “Free the Ocklawaha River” quickly followed. But proponents of retaining the Rodman Reservoir, which became a magnet for bass fishermen, prevailed.

Now, the Kirkpatrick Dam is in danger of failing and the state must decide whether to spend millions to replace a dam that will never fulfill its original purpose, or to permanently breach the dam and undo the environmental damage that resulted from its construction 53 years ago. “Partial” restoration, which calls for breaching the dam rather than complete removal, is the preferred alternative and has been supported by multiple scientific assessments, economic studies, agency recommendations, environmental impact statements and conservation organizations. This “shovel ready” plan would restore the natural river channel, water flows and levels, and floodplain function to pre-dam conditions. Recreational access would be expanded and enhanced.



You can access the survey at <https://floridaswater.formstack.com/forms/rodman> . It is organized around 4 basic questions about your position and an “additional comments” section. It will remain “live”

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for only 30 days – from September 23 through October 23 – so please do not delay your participation and risk missing this critically important opportunity to finally make restoration a reality. We have provided talking points and other guidance to help you compose your own answers to each of the primary questions. You can find additional information at <https://www.freetheocklawaha.com/>. Although the survey begins by asking whether you have ever visited the dam or reservoir, a “yes” answer is not required for participation, or for your position to matter. We ALL have a stake in the future decision about restoration.

## **1. What would you like to see happen with the Rodman Reservoir and Kirkpatrick Dam moving forward?**

Restoration of a free-flowing Ocklawaha River by breaching the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam. Every additional day the dam and reservoir remain in place results in additional environmental degradation.

## **2. What is the most important piece of information that supports your position?**

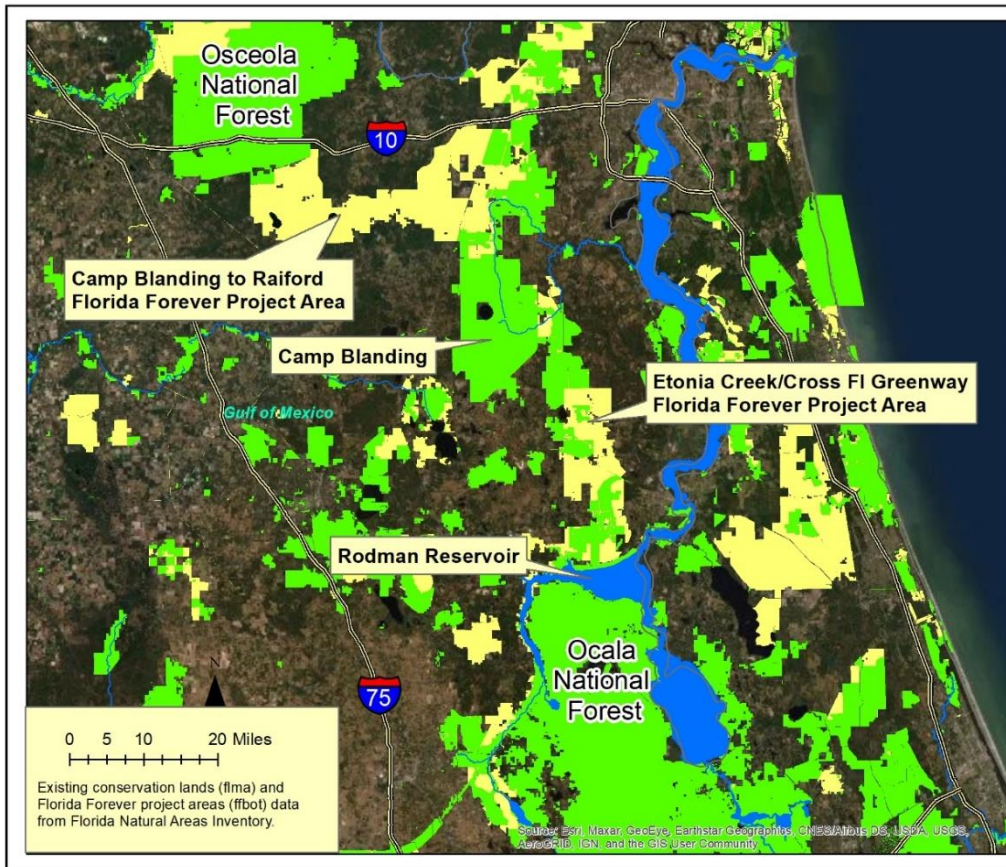
This question may require the most substantial answer. The “pros” for restoration are many, and even the long list we have provided is incomplete. We begin the list with plant-based arguments that support the FNPS mission and have included many others that point to the broad array of environmental and economic benefits that would result from restoration. Pick the ones that resonate most on a personal level, and please feel free to compose the answer in your own words. You are allowed a total of 2,500 characters for your answer, which is sufficient for 5 or 6 paragraphs if you so wish. We have also provided an additional map that helps illustrate the regional and statewide significance of the benefits of restoration.

- 7,500 acres of the lower Ocklawaha’s historic forested floodplain, 20 freshwater springs, and many miles of natural river channel that were drowned as a result of dam construction would be restored.
- Thousands of acres of submerged aquatic plant communities would be able to regenerate in the restored river channel, and in the re-emerged spring run streams that drained into the Ocklawaha historically.
- 8,000 acres of stressed floodplain wetland located downstream of the dam would be enhanced.
- Imperiled plant species like the endangered Star Anise and threatened Hartwrightia, which are native to the banks of this region’s spring run streams, could expand their range into the restored spring systems.
- Draining the Rodman Reservoir would remove the single greatest barrier to plant and animal movement along the Ocala to Osceola (O2O) Wildlife Corridor by replacing the open water expanse of the Reservoir with a restored floodplain forest, to the benefit of many listed plant species native to the region including the Federally listed Claspig Warea and Scrub Buckwheat.

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- Three river systems - the Ocklawaha, Silver and St. Johns – would experience significant environmental improvement from restoration.
- Manatees would regain open access to the warm water habitats of the Ocklawaha and Silver Springs.
- Migratory fish including the Striped Bass, American shad, American eel, and the critically Endangered Atlantic Sturgeon and Shortnose Sturgeon would once again have open access to the Ocklawaha system if the dam is breached.
- Recreational sport fishing would be enhanced by allowing the Florida strain of the Striped Bass to reclaim what used to be its primary spawning habitat – the Ocklawaha.
- At least 150 million gallons a day of additional natural flow, and potentially much more, would be restored to the Lower St. Johns River, improving water quality and increasing resiliency of the entire St Johns/Ocklawaha River system by impeding the salt water intrusion resulting from sea level rise.
- An estimated \$14 Million in dam repairs, measured in 2006 dollars, would be saved by avoiding repairs to a dam that has exceeded its life expectancy and never fulfilled the purpose for its construction.
- The large expenditures required for herbicide treatments to control the growth of invasive aquatic weeds and to conduct other ongoing maintenance needs, including periodic drawdowns, in a futile attempt to maintain water quality and recreational access in the stagnant waters of the Reservoir, would become unnecessary.
- \$57 million in potential flood damages to downstream areas around the community of Welaka would be avoided in the event of a dam failure.
- Economic analyses conducted by researchers at the University of Florida demonstrate the economic impact from eco-tourists who use the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River is twice that of the anglers and boaters using the Rodman Reservoir, and annual use of the Reservoir's recreation sites has been on a downward trend since records began in 2004 as water quality and fish production have continued to decline year after year.
- When accounting for revenues generated by increased recreational usage, a cost-benefit analysis determined restoration would produce a cumulative net benefit of \$47.2 million over the first 10 years, versus a cumulative loss of \$5.3 million with repair and maintenance of the dam.
- The recreational development component included in the restoration plan would benefit nearby residents and expand eco-tourism, and more than compensate for loss of the Reservoir.



### 3. What would be your biggest concern if your desired outcome is not achieved?

- The broad array of environmental benefits to native flora and fauna, including many imperiled species, that would result from restoration would not be possible.
- Water quality in the Rodman Reservoir and Lower Ocklawaha/St Johns River system would continue to decline.
- The economic benefits that would result from increased and enhanced recreational usage would be denied to the surrounding local communities.
- Residents and business owners in areas immediately downstream of the dam would continue to be under threat in the event of failure of a dam that has never, and will never, satisfy the purpose of its construction.
- Thousands of acres of submerged aquatic plant communities would be unable to regenerate in a restored river channel and in the re-emerged spring run streams, and 7,500 acres of floodplain forest would not be restored.

- The Reservoir would continue to be a barrier to movement by native wildlife and plant life along the length of the O2O Corridor, and compromise the value of Florida's investments in conserving lands like the Etoniah Creek State Forest, and approved Florida Forever projects.
- Taxpayers will perpetually be on the hook for repair and maintenance of the dam and Reservoir, and continue to be liable for any loss of life or property damage that would result from a dam failure.
- Imperiled plant species like the endangered Star Anise and threatened Hartwrightia, which are native to the banks of this region's spring run streams, would be unable to expand their range into the unrestored spring systems.

#### **4. Is there any scenario short of fully achieving your desired outcome you could support?**

No. Breaching the dam is 53 years overdue and there is no compromise measure that would achieve even a fraction of the environmental and economic benefits of restoration.

The survey concludes with the option of providing additional comments (at your own discretion if you wish to elaborate on anything or add personal reflections or considerations). Remember that you do not need to be a local resident, or even a Florida resident, to participate in the survey! Take an expansive view of ecotourism and recreational usage by including Silver Springs, the Ocala National Forest, the St Johns River, and important land conservation projects like the Etoniah Creek/Cross Florida Greenway Florida Forever project. Ultimately, we all have a stake, environmental and economic, in whether Florida finally restores a free-flowing Ocklawaha River.