



Press Release

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New Coalition Mobilizes During Ocklawaha River Drawdown

Fifty years ago, Marjorie Harris Carr, founder of Florida Defenders of the Environment, mobilized 162 scientists to pressure President Nixon to stop the Cross Florida Barge Canal. They signed a letter of support to President Nixon and released a 115-page report on the “Environmental Impact of the Cross Florida Barge Canal with Special Emphasis on the Ocklawaha Region Ecosystem.” The effort led to significant national press, support from federal agency staff and elected officials, and ended with President Nixon halting the canal project in January 1971.

The presidential action was too late to avoid all impacts to the St. Johns, Ocklawaha and Silver Rivers. The Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam had already been built, flooding 7,500 acres of forested wetlands, 20 springs, and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River. Negative impacts from this action continue today.

Fifty years later, a coalition of thirty-three-organizations has formed “The Free the Ocklawaha Coalition – Energized!” (The FORCE), including many of Florida’s major environmental organizations, representing thousands of members. Its mission is to restore the Ocklawaha as a free-flowing River, reconnecting the Silver and St. Johns Rivers. Ironically, the Coalition steering committee includes Carr’s granddaughter, Jenny Carr, President of Florida Defenders of the Environment. The organization’s playbook uses many of the successful strategies that Jenny’s grandmother used 50 years ago.

The Coalition is highlighting the state and national significance of this river system, conducting briefings with state and local leaders, hosting viewings of the *Lost Springs* documentary, distributing thousands of postcards and social media posts and conducting river tours. The campaign explains the six key benefits of restoration – bringing back migratory fish, expanding manatee habitat, improving water

flow and quality, restoring wetland forests, expanding recreational opportunities, and revitalizing Northeast Florida's economy.

Tours of the impounded portion of the Ocklawaha River during the 2020 reservoir drawdown provide a glimpse of what partial river restoration would look like. Some of the lost springs of the Ocklawaha are uncovered and the sandy banks of the historic river and the trunks of giant cypress trees are revealed. The cypress graveyard, a reminder of past destruction, draws hundreds of avian visitors including white pelicans, wood storks, roseate spoonbills, great egrets, eagles and even a few snail kites.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection conducts a drawdown of the Rodman Reservoir, generally every three to four years, to maintain the ecological health and productivity of the reservoir while offering improved recreational benefits for the public. The drawdown began in October 2019 and is currently in its lowest state, approximately 11 feet below the minimum normal pool level of 18 feet. Approximately 65 percent of the reservoir has been dewatered. The Reservoir is scheduled to begin refilling March 1-15, 2020. *(FDEP public notice, Sept. 17, 2019)*

Through this renewed campaign and the tours, the FORCE members want to undo the tragedy that occurred over 50 years ago by partially restoring the Ocklawaha River and breaching the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam. They are hopeful Florida Governor Ron DeSantis will offer his support. He has made a commitment to protecting Florida's waterways and springs. Partial restoration benefits the Ocklawaha, Silver and St. Johns Rivers and historic Silver Springs while keeping the recreational amenities surrounding the Dam.

The Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam is past its 50-year life expectancy. Putting millions of dollars into repairs to extend the life of a dam that has never served its intended purpose is a poor investment. A 2017 University of Florida study estimated that the direct annual recreational expenditures for the free-flowing section of the Ocklawaha were \$20 million, versus \$6 million for the impounded section of the Ocklawaha. The report also stated that use of the impounded portion of the Ocklawaha has been decreasing since 2004, while use of the natural section of the river has been steadily increasing.
