



## Ocklawaha River Restoration **Economic Impact**

**KEY REFERENCE:** *“The economic impact from eco-tourists who use the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River is twice that of the anglers and boaters at Rodman Reservoir. Annual use of the reservoir recreation sites has been on a downward trend since records began in 2004 while use of the river sites has remained steady and consistently increased over the past three years.” - UF Economic Study*

### **Current Conditions: Reservoir Sites**

- Annual direct visitor expenditures are estimated at \$6 million at the reservoir sites
- Annual use of the reservoir recreation sites has been on a downward trend since records began in 2004
- Estimated annual operating costs of the dam are \$198,000
- Estimated projections for bringing the Buckman Lock, Kirkpatrick Dam and Spillway, and the Eureka Lock and Dam up to latest standards for operation are \$4 million
- Short-term jobs continue to conduct maintenance activities and to fix deteriorating infrastructure
- Seven bait shops were closed in Putnam County and northeast Marion County during recent years with only one remaining in the area that services bass anglers
- Tournament fishermen often check-in at the Rodman and fish the St. Johns with many of the winning catches coming from outside the reservoir area
- River guides and paddling groups routinely report river blockages that create an unreliable recreational resource. One major paddling trip canceled this year.

### **Current and Projected Conditions: River Sites and Restored River**

- Annual direct visitor expenditures were estimated at \$13.6 million at the river sites
- Annual use of the river sites has remained steady and consistently increased over the past three years
- The economic impact from visitors using the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River is twice that of the anglers and boaters at Rodman Reservoir
- Increased opportunities for commercial fishing and shellfish including shrimp, crabs and mullet.
- Estimated operating costs for the area after restoration are approximately \$234,000
- Restoration could provide multi-year jobs for residents conducting river restoration efforts including new bridge/road construction
- Improved river and recreational resources could translate to long-term jobs created for businesses with increased visitor counts using the Ocklawaha River and Silver Springs State Park due to improved fishing, more diverse recreational opportunities and manatee and wildlife viewing

## **An Economic Comparison of the Rodman Reservoir to the Natural Portions of the Ocklawaha River**

Elected officials and community leaders asked for economic data that would support restoration. The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Services was contracted to do a study on the: *Economic Importance of the Public Perceptions for Water Resource Management of the Ocklawaha River*. The primary findings were:

- The economic impact from eco-tourists who use the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River (Marion County) is twice that of the anglers and boaters at Rodman Reservoir (Putnam County)
- Overall visitor direct expenditures were estimated at \$6 million at the reservoir sites versus almost \$13.6 million at the river sites
- An estimated 1.8 million people visited these sites during the two-year study period

Annual use of the reservoir recreation sites has been on a downward trend since records began in 2004 while use of the river sites has remained steady and consistently increased over the past three years. (Robert Knight, Florida Silver Springs Conservation Plan)

This data supports the partial restoration option recommended in the Greenway Plan and widely endorsed by federal and state agencies, conservation organizations and many user groups.

### **Restoration and Maintenance Costs**

According to the latest Greenway Plan, “The projected cost for repairs and to bring the Buckman Lock, Kirkpatrick Dam and Spillway, and the Eureka Lock and Dam up to latest standards for operation is \$4 million. This estimate is based on the July 2015 inspection report and years of historical data from the Inglis Lock and Dam repair projects and assessment reports.” (Greenway Plan, 2017-2027) Opponents of the dam suggest that investing \$4 million into a project that has no useful purpose is not in the best interest of taxpayers.

The Greenway Plan states that, “The estimated cost for restoration of the Ocklawaha River is \$25.8 million. The plan suggests that, “Annual operating costs for the dam components and activities and the operating costs for the area after restoration are approximately the same: \$198,000 and \$234,000, respectively.”

Although routine operational costs produced by the FDEP Greenways staff seem to be similar between the current operation and the partially restored river, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection previously estimated that necessary repairs and improvements for the continued operation of Buckman Lock, Kirkpatrick Dam and Spillway and the Eureka Lock and Dam would cost approximately \$14.1 million (Greenway Plan 2007-2017), not the \$4 million now in the greenway plan 2017-2027. Other estimates indicate that over its 45-year life, it is estimated that more than \$20 million in funding has been spent for a de-authorized, antiquated project. Attempts to obtain and analyze this information through two public records requests were unsuccessful.

## Putnam and Marion County: Victims of the Rodman Dam

### The Silver Springs Economic Story

Florida's Silver Springs once attracted over a million visitors a year, today the former attraction and state park attracts 250,000 visitors annually (Silver Springs Restoration Plan, 2014). According to boat drivers who were employed for decades at the attraction, the glass-bottomed boat tour was shortened from an hour to 30 minutes during the 1980s because of the loss of fish and wildlife and degraded quality of the springs (Film: *The Silver River Story*). This was after the effects of the Rodman Dam were felt, along with increased nutrients in the river from runoff and septic tanks. Although nutrients dumped into the aquifer from septic tanks, lawns and other sources certainly have damaged the river, the dam led to the demise of migratory fish populations and reduced diversity of aquatic and terrestrial species.

The partial restoration of the dam would return a wide variety of migratory fish and is projected by manatee experts to become a haven for the manatee in search of warm water habitat in the winter and places of refuge.

A motel owner at the public hearing for the designation of the Silver Springs Community Development Area explained that he had instances where guest booked a week due to beautiful online historic photos of the springs, and then canceling after a day or two. A visual inspection of east SR40 in the areas around the state park vividly reveals the toll that declining tourism has taken on businesses.

### Designation of Silver Springs Community as Redevelopment Area

Because of this, in 2017, Marion County created a Silver Springs Community Redevelopment Area to revive the Silver Springs area through adopting architectural and site design standards for the State Road 40/Silver Springs Blvd. area. Although this effort has merit, reviving the economy of this area must include efforts to restore Silver Springs and the Ocklawaha River.

"The Silver Springs Community Redevelopment Area (CRA) recognizes the unique location of Florida's Silver Springs and the surrounding Silver Springs community. The area serves as a gateway to the heart of Marion County and the environmental crossroads formed by the Silver Springs State Park, Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway and Indian Lake State Forest."

The 3,574-acre area is comprised of 876 parcels, 217 vacant, and 43% of the area is state-owned property including Silver River State Park. "The CRA is intended to create opportunities to further environmentally aware economic growth and development, supporting and highlighting the relationships between Marion County's citizens, businesses, and the environmental features surrounding the community. The creation of the Community Redevelopment Agency to govern the redevelopment efforts within the area would provide opportunities to encourage new capital investments for residential, commercial, and tourism development. The key focus would be to encourage job-generating investments as part of the redevelopment initiative while at the same time enhancing the environmental quality of the area." (Silver Springs Community Redevelopment Plan, Marion County, 2013)

To establish the CRA, a study was conducted in 2012 by Real Estate Research Consultants. The study, which included Silver Springs State Park concluded, "When compared to Marion County as a whole, the conditions of the Proposed Redevelopment Area are indicative of blight."

This analysis outlined seven blighted conditions and one slum condition. “In combination, these conditions are retarding the immediate and longer term social, economic, and physical development of the Study Area.” (Silver Springs Community Redevelopment Plan, Marion County, 2013)

### **Putnam County Economic Story**

Today, Putnam county’s poverty level ranks 65 out of 67 Florida counties (www.welfareinfo.com) with an average household income of \$32,714, compared to the U.S. average of \$53,482. (www.bestplaces.net)

### **A County Success Story**

But all is not dismal, one of the city’s recent success stories is its St. Johns Riverfront revitalization efforts including the St. Johns River Environmental Center and new Hampton Inn, as well as expanding nature-cultural tourist offerings. The Bartram Trails group is conducting St. Johns River tours and trail hikes, as well as producing a successful annual festival drawing hundreds of guests. Restoring the Ocklawaha River would complement these St. Johns River efforts.

### **The County’s Past and Future Projections**

The county needs a boost to draw residents, new businesses, as well as visitors. Putnam County has seen their job market decrease by .3% over the last year. Future job growth over the next ten years is predicted to be 25.9% which is below the national average of 33.5%. On August 8, 2018, a Washington Post article by Robert Samuels entitled, *The help Trump promised hasn’t come. So this ‘dying city’ is determined to save itself*, said “By 2013, local leaders were horrified to learn that an expert hired by the Florida League of Cities had found that Palatka was the state’s only dying city. Opioid abuse is rampant, and 1 in 10 residents continue to live in public housing. The school system ranks among Florida’s worst. And the city’s pipes are so old that the water sometimes comes out the color rust.”

### **Keeping the County Economy Whole**

With Putnam county’s tenuous economic picture, it is understandable why some key leaders are holding onto the last great icon of booming bass fishing industry of the past – The Rodman Dam and Reservoir. As an Ocklawaha River partial restoration plan is being evaluated and funding sources are being identified, federal and state leaders need to consider incentives to make sure the county’s economy is kept whole. Good examples exist where this has been done in the past. Legislation to create a water treatment and storage reservoir for Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades included state budget incentives for the surrounding area. Local leaders were concerned that the loss of agricultural lands would negatively impact nearby communities.

Discussions with Putnam County leaders when similar discussions occurred during the late 1990s indicated that the most sought-after incentives then were items such as workforce development assistance and stormwater improvements. Other creative strategies could involve enhanced amenities such as a visitor/history center at the Rodman Dam or other appropriate site, a new car/hiking bridge with wildlife viewing area over the Rodman Reservoir and other recreational enhancements along the river for Putnam and Marion counties.

Incentivizing the potentially locally effected communities is one strategy to move forward a project that would economically and environmentally benefit northeast Florida and beyond, while assuring local economies thrive. Although the economic research points to these areas thriving due to river restoration, some of those benefits may not be immediately achieved and in many cases perception and holding on to past ways of doing business can be a real barrier to forward progress.

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