

AI Summary: Water First North Florida Makes Its First County Appearance - It Was a Tough Sell for the SRWMD - No One Was Buying

The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) presented its **Water First North Florida** plan to the Columbia County Board of County Commissioners, proposing to pipe approximately 40 million gallons per day of highly treated reclaimed wastewater from Jacksonville to recharge the local aquifer and restore declining springs.

Dr. Amy Brown explained that joint planning with the St. Johns River WMD has been ongoing since 2008, and without action, existing water users face a **30% reduction in allocations**. The district argues this option is more cost-effective than alternatives like desalination.

However, residents and commissioners responded with **overwhelming opposition**.

Key concerns included contamination from PFAS ("forever chemicals"), pharmaceuticals, and hormones, with critics arguing treatment technology is unproven. Many viewed the project as environmental injustice — rural counties serving as a dumping ground for Jacksonville's waste.

Commissioner Robbie Hollingsworth pushed for desalination instead, and others questioned liability, long-term monitoring, and local control. The county lobbyist noted the project has limited legislative traction, with only a \$20 million Senate budget item and no House support.

SRWMD Executive Director Hugh Thomas affirmed that any water introduced would meet drinking water standards and that the district would continue evaluating options while listening to residents' concerns.