



SUWANNEE RIVER

WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Minimum Flow and Minimum Water Level (MFL) Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee (LSFI) River Systems MFL FAQs

What is the new, proposed MFL?

A minimum flow and minimum water level (MFL) evaluation was used to determine the quantity of water needed to ensure the safety and health of the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee (LSFI) Rivers and associated springs. The new LSFI MFL evaluation has determined that median Santa Fe River flows should be 91.9% near Ft. White and 91% near US Hwy 441 gaging stations, and that median Ichetucknee River flows should be 97.2% at the US Hwy 27 gaging station.

To review the 2019 LSFI Technical Document, visit the [LSFI webpage](#).

How does the new, proposed MFL differ from the 2015 LSFI MFL evaluation?

The existing and proposed MFL evaluations have determined that similar amounts of water are needed to preserve the environmental health of these ecosystems and prevent significant harm from water withdrawals (pumping). This consistency in findings supports the validity and outcome of the previous 2015 MFL evaluation.

The new MFL evaluation utilizes the best available science and data including the use of the North Florida Southeast Georgia (NFSEG) groundwater model. An additional gaging station along the Lower Santa Fe River (near US HWY 441) was utilized to account for the unique river characteristics of that section of the river and to better assess the status of the river.

Lower Santa Fe River

Ichetucknee River

| | Fort White | | US Hwy 441 | | US Hwy 27 | |
|------------------------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| | Proposed | Existing | Proposed | Existing | Proposed | Existing |
| <i>Median Historical Flow</i> | 1270 | 1320 | 587 | n/a | 356 | 354 |
| <i>Proposed MFL Threshold</i> | 1167 | 1214 | 534 | n/a | 346 | 343 |
| <i>% of Flow</i> | 91.9% | 92.0% | 91.0% | n/a | 97.2% | 96.9% |
| <i>Difference (cfs)</i> | 103 | 106 | 53 | n/a | 10 | 11 |
| <i>Relative flow reduction (%)</i> | 8.1% | 8.0% | 9.0% | n/a | 2.8% | 3.1% |

How will the new LSFJ MFL impact current permittees in that area?

Until an assessment of the current health of the rivers and springs has been completed with the new MFL, it is unknown if or how the new LSFJ MFL could impact existing permittees.

Before the MFL is adopted by rule, flows in the rivers are assessed to determine their status. If water use (or pumping) does not exceed allowable flow reductions, the rivers, and associated springs are considered meeting the MFL. If current consumptive water use (pumping withdrawals) is shown to be greater than the MFL thresholds, the rivers and springs will be deemed to be in “recovery.” If future consumptive water use (within in 20-year planning horizon) is projected to exceed MFL thresholds, the systems will be deemed to be in “prevention”. When the need for recovery and/or prevention is identified, a strategy is created to recover the water needed to bring the river back to or above the MFL threshold. The recovery and/or prevention strategy includes a suite of options including water resource planning, permitting conditions, and projects.

How will the new LSFJ MFL impact new potential permittees in that area?

Until an assessment of the current health of the rivers and springs has been completed with the new MFL, it is unknown if or how the new LSFJ MFL could impact new permittees.

Specific impacts to new or future water use permittees will be determined when the status assessment is conducted.

Why are permits allowed in areas that are deemed to be in “recovery”?

The 2015 LSFJ MFL evaluation found the Santa Fe and Ichetucknee Rivers to be in recovery, meaning water levels were below the established MFL threshold and that less consumptive water use (pumping) was needed to maintain healthy river and springs ecosystems. As defined in rule, the 2015 recovery strategy stated that the regulatory measures preceded the development of longer-term recovery measures and:

- existing permits could continue,
- renewals that cause an impact are limited to a five-year permit duration condition and no new impacts were allowed,
- and new permits may be issued if they do not cause an impact at reference stations along the river or at springs.

Applicants may receive a 20-year permit only when their entire impact is offset.

When will the new LSFJ MFL be enacted/enforced?

The previous LSFJ MFL was adopted into rule (Ch. 62-42, F.A.C.) in June 2015 and is currently in place. It is anticipated that the new LSFJ MFL rule will be adopted during the summer of 2020.

Will the new LSFJ MFL impact the Seven Springs permit recommendation differently than the current/old LSFJ MFL?

The issuance of water use permits is governed by state/District rules and state statutes. The total water available for consumptive use under the new MFL evaluation is consistent with the current/old MFL. Until an assessment has been conducted for the new LSFJ MFL rule, it is unknown how any permit request and staff recommendation would be impacted.

District staff follow a lengthy and strenuous evaluation for consumptive use permit requests. For more information regarding the permit process, visit www.MySuwanneeRiver.com.

General MFL FAQs

What are minimum flows and minimum water levels (MFLs)?

In short, an MFL sets a limit on how much water can be withdrawn from various water resources to prevent significant harm from occurring to those resources or the ecology of the area.

What does “significant harm” mean?

The Florida legislature did not define the term ‘significant harm’ in the statute requiring state water management districts to establish MFLs. However, the District has developed criteria for significant harm as it relates to types of water resources. The criteria are based on environmental changes resulting from reductions in water flows or levels. The District’s process for setting MFLs has been reviewed and accepted by numerous panels of independent scientists. The Nature Conservancy has determined that MFL thresholds with a shift less than 10% (see MFL Evaluation table above) from historical flows offer the highest protection and lowest risk to the resource.

Why does the Suwannee River Water Management District establish MFLs?

Florida law (Chapter 373.042, Florida Statutes) requires the water management districts or the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to establish MFLs. Rivers, streams, estuaries, and springs require minimum flows, while minimum levels are developed for lakes, wetlands, and aquifers.

With so many waterways in the District, how does the District prioritize which MFLs to set?

The District sets a priority list and schedule for the establishment of MFLs within its boundaries. Florida law requires the District to review and, if necessary, revise the list and schedule for prioritized water bodies annually and submit to FDEP for approval. The current Priority List and Schedule is available on the District’s website.

How are MFLs determined?

District scientists consider how wetlands, lakes, rivers, estuaries, and aquifers adjust to changes in hydrologic conditions. For each priority water body, the District studies and collects a large amount of information including historical water levels and flow rates, vegetation data, water quality data, wildlife variety and abundances, and other pertinent information. As each natural system is unique, the District and other experts in the field have developed many methods for setting MFLs using the best science available, which includes an extensive analysis of the information collected, the use of advanced computer models, and scientific peer review.

Does anyone besides District staff get to review a proposed MFL before it is set?

Yes, an essential component of the MFL process includes the District’s voluntary use of peer review in which a panel of independent scientists review and comment on proposed MFLs and the data and methodology used for their development. In addition to this scientific peer review, other local, state and federal agencies, and the public have opportunities to review and provide comments. Public meetings are held to explain the proposed MFL and further allow the public an opportunity to comment. These comments are read and considered by District staff before making a final recommendation to the District’s Governing Board or FDEP. Staff recommendations concerning MFLs are considered by the Governing Board at publicly noticed Board meetings, which provide another opportunity for public input.

Who gives the final approval for an MFL?

The District’s Governing Board approves MFLs by a majority vote. If the Governing Board votes to adopt an MFL, it is adopted into rule (Chapter 40B-8, Florida Administrative Code). Where recharge and impacts occur

across multiple districts MFLs are adopted by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection under Chapter 62-42, Florida Administrative Code.

How does the Suwannee River Water Management District use MFLs?

MFLs are used by the District to plan for current and future regional water needs, which may include the need to offset groundwater use through projects that encourage conservation and provide alternative water supplies. MFLs are an important tool for the District's water use and environmental permitting programs to ensure that withdrawals do not exceed an established MFL and cause significant harm to the water resources or ecology of the area.

Does an MFL allow the withdrawal of water from the aquifer or other water bodies?

No, an MFL does not authorize the withdrawal of water. Anyone wanting to withdraw quantities of water that requires a water use permit must follow the proper procedures for permit issuance. District staff consider established MFLs as part of the decision-making process when reviewing permit applications. This often includes running computer models to evaluate the effects of proposed withdrawals. For an applicant to obtain a water use permit, the effect of proposed withdrawals must consider relevant MFLs.

What are the District's requirements to obtain a permit to withdraw water?

Three primary criteria (pursuant to Chapter 373.223, Florida Statutes) must be satisfied before obtaining a permit from the District. The proposed water use must:

1. Be reasonable and beneficial,
2. Not interfere with any existing legal use of water, and
3. Be consistent with the public interest.

Additionally, the proposed withdrawal, combined with existing withdrawals, must not cause adverse impacts to the environment, including adversely impacting an established MFL.

Can the withdrawal of water be permitted from a waterbody that does not have an established MFL?

Yes, provided the permit applicant meets all requirements for the issuance of a water use permit.

What happens if MFLs are not being met?

A recovery strategy is implemented if an MFL is not currently met. A prevention strategy is implemented if an MFL is projected to not be met in the next 20 years. Prevention and recovery strategies allow for providing sufficient water supplies for all existing and projected water uses through the development of additional water supplies, implementation of conservation and efficiency measures, and regulatory measures. The District funds the initiatives associated with prevention and recovery strategies with help from the Legislature, local governments and other project stakeholders. The intent of these strategies is to achieve recovery to the established MFL as soon as possible and to prevent future water flows or levels from falling below an established MFL.

Are MFLs ever reevaluated?

Yes, MFLs are reevaluated periodically when District staff determines it is necessary, and MFLs can have specific timeframes for reevaluation that were established by the District's Governing Board. The District always uses the best available science in its decision making and recognizes that scientific knowledge will continue to improve over time. Reevaluating an MFL allows the use of updated data, the latest computer models, and other analytical tools to assess and revise, if necessary, an MFL that was previously established.