

## **Bay County Emergency Wellfields: Putting Public Safety First**

Bay County's efforts to establish an emergency water supply have been well publicized and well documented. This is about the safety and security of Bay County residents, should something compromise the Deer Point dam, be it a hurricane, terrorist act or any other calamity.

Additionally, if a hurricane or tornado damaged equipment at the William's Bayou pumping station, a similar emergency interconnectivity would be necessary. The following provides an in-depth timeline and explanation of the motivation behind Bay County's seeking a Northwest Florida Water Management District permit for an emergency water supply. Supporting documents are available for download and public review.

### **Why does Bay County need an emergency water supply?**

Bay County Utilities provides potable water to the vast majority of Bay County residents – some 160,400 people – via the Deer Point Reservoir, a 4,500-acre, manmade surface-water reservoir constructed in 1961. The reservoir also supplies local industries with untreated water. Deer Point Reservoir is the sole source of water for most of Bay County's residents, businesses and visitors, with approximately 90 percent of the people here relying entirely on the reservoir for drinking water.

Bay County has long recognized the vulnerability of its water supply. A 1985 [story](#) in the News Herald outlines the county's recognition of a need for an emergency supply, citing a train derailment as a possible scenario that could cause contamination at Deer Point Reservoir. In 1985, fittings that would allow for the eventual tie-in of a wellfield were [added](#) to the raw water transmission system. Discussions concerning the need to find an alternate, emergency supply began in earnest in the 1990s following Hurricane Opal.

An Aug. 21, 1997 [letter](#) by then-Utilities Director Travis Windham to the state Hazard Mitigation Grant Program highlights the threat of a storm to the structure.

“If the reservoir becomes contaminated with salt water, we would have to shut down our water system,” Windham wrote. The direct cost to the county of shutting down the water plant, as calculated at that time, would be more than \$190 million per month, leaving most of the county without water, wastewater services or fire protection. Closed businesses and the possible shuttering of critical facilities such as hospitals or nursing homes would be a real possibility. The letter goes on to note that Hurricane Opal did, in fact, cause minimal salt water intrusion due to storm surge, increasing chloride levels enough to mandate the closure of the paper mill for approximately three weeks.

In Bay County's [1999 Strategic Plan](#) for the water system, the need for an “Emergency Wellfield Back-Up” is discussed. The plan notes that the storm surge associated with Hurricane Opal in October 1995 “came within inches of overtopping the tide flap gates on the dam.”

A March 2003 study, mandated for public utility systems by the federal government in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 also noted an emergency wellfield supply as being a means for mitigating contamination of Deer Point Reservoir.

In June 2006, the county's Water and Wastewater Strategic Plan again discusses the need for emergency well field system ([see Table 5-12, p. 5-10](#)).

A 2008 study conducted by Baskerville-Donovan of the Deer Point Reservoir Dam further highlights the dam's vulnerabilities to a hurricane (see [Bay County Deer Point Reservoir Dam Evaluation](#), p.13, Appendix G).

Dr. Paul A. Work, of Georgia Tech, determined that a storm of similar magnitude to Hurricane Ivan in 2004, which was classified as a Category 3 hurricane, making landfall near Panama City would have a storm surge that would overtop the Deer Point Dam and bridge by as much as seven feet (see Bay County Surge Zones). Bay County has been fortunate in that no hurricane has hit in a manner that would compromise its drinking water supply, but the threat is clearly there.

An [analysis](#) of Florida utilities using surface water systems concludes that Bay County Utility Services is unique in that the Deer Point Reservoir is the only surface water reservoir in Florida that could be subject to salt water intrusion due to tide [surge](#) or catastrophic structural failure of the dam. Further, most surface water facilities similar in size to Bay County Utilities have nearby interconnecting utilities that give them the ability to purchase water should the need arise. Bay County has no such interconnectivity.

The need for an emergency wellfield site is well documented and authentic. The effort constitutes good, responsible planning, and Bay County is committed to ensuring the safety of its residents and visitors, should disaster strike.

## **Will the wellfield harm the Sand Hills lakes?**

On April 3, 2007, the Bay County Commission hired HydroGeologic, a nationally renowned company, to conduct a [groundwater modeling study](#) for the project. Geologists spent the next two-plus years examining the potential effects of Bay County's emergency system on the Floridan Aquifer, Surficial Aquifer, wetlands, lakes, streams and groundwater users in the vicinity of the proposed withdrawals. According to the NWFLWMD [staff report](#), "The drawdowns are considered minor and not anticipated to cause adverse impacts to the Floridan Aquifer, the Surficial Aquifer or nearby users."

The Northwest Florida Water Management District's permit sets very, very strict monitoring guidelines for any wells drawing water from the aquifer.

Despite the negligible anticipated effect, the district is adamant that the wells be closely monitored to ensure early recognition and management of unanticipated impacts, should they arise. Under the permit, the NWFLWMD has the discretion to halt any pumping activity immediately following a finding of an adverse impact and the district mandates that Bay County mitigate any damage.

If the permit is approved, pumping of water from the wells would not begin immediately. Bay County would be required to monitor the wells for one full year before any water could be used for production purposes.

The [wellfield](#) is not meant to replace the Deer Point Reservoir, but supplement it only a fraction of the level produced by the reservoir.

## **Was the public notified of the emergency wellfield plans?**

The notion that Bay County has in any way been surreptitious or disingenuous about its efforts to obtain the well field is patently false and easily dispelled. Since the inception of the well field effort, the plan has been openly discussed at several appropriately advertised public meetings of the Bay County Commission. The commission's agenda is run in the local newspaper and available online for public review prior to each meeting.

The local newspaper and television stations have all covered the effort to build an emergency backup for Bay County residents extensively. The News Herald, alone, covered the project in stories on the following dates: Jan. 18, 1985, "[Plan for back up water system heard by county](#)"; Nov. 17, 2006, "[County eyes new water source](#)"; July 2, 2007, "[County seeks water backup](#)"; Jan. 7, 2008, "[Our pristine jewel](#)"; Nov. 19, 2008, "County board turns to jobs" subsection "[Water grant](#)"; Feb. 9, 2009, "[County looks northwest for water.](#)"

The Miami-based Knight Family Trust and some Washington County officials have decried Bay County's efforts as having been deliberately concealed, yet several Washington County staff members and at least two sitting Washington County Commissioners attended a December 2008 public meeting ([see pp. 35-41](#) for a list of attendees) in Ebro concerning the sector plan sought by the Knight Family Trust, which owns some 48,000 acres in Washington County and 7,000 acres in Bay County. The developer seeks to build on the property, constructing some 30,000 homes (see p. 9) and 10 million square feet of non-residential development. The developer clearly discusses its groundwater needs for the sector plan development on Page 17 of its [Sector Plan Scoping Document](#):

"The (Knight) property may provide a potential location for a regional well field. The aquifer recharge abilities of the Washington and Bay County sandhills, part of the West Florida Highlands physiographic province, may provide an abundant groundwater supply."

Misinformation has been distributed recently to Sand Hills lakes property owners by the “Coalition to Save Sand Hill Lakes,” an organization created entirely by a Tallahassee public relations firm hired by the Knight Family Trust in an effort to create public opposition to Bay County’s emergency wellfield plans.

Principal among the public relations firm’s claims via its “coalition” is that the Knight Family was not aware of Bay County’s plans. However, the Knight Family’s own sector plan scoping document points out that: “Further, Bay County and the Northwest Florida Water Management District have constructed groundwater test wells near the property in Bay County” (see Knight Sector Plan, p. 17).

Bay County’s emergency wellfield efforts are justified for the safety and security of its residents and have been proven to have a negligible effect on local water bodies.