

# **An Economic Evaluation of Ocklawaha/Silver River Restoration:**

## ***University of Florida Study Finds Free-Flowing Ocklawaha River Nearly Doubles Economic Opportunity***

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SILVER SPRINGS, FL – The University of Florida (UF) Food and Resource Economics Department recently completed two years of study of the economic importance and public preferences related to restoration of the Ocklawaha River. UF experts concluded that total expenditures and economic impacts of visitor spending for recreational activities on the natural portions of the Ocklawaha River were about twice as high as for recreational activities on the Rodman Reservoir. This critical information is an important factor in the ongoing controversy surrounding breaching the Kirkpatrick Dam and ultimate restoration of a free-flowing Ocklawaha River.

Public use of the Ocklawaha and Silver rivers was monitored during the 2016 winter drawdown of the Rodman Reservoir when the natural river and 20 springs were fully and/or partially exposed and available for sightseeing, paddling, and fishing, as well as during the 2017 period when the Rodman Reservoir was filled, and the river and springs were not accessible. Recreational users were interviewed to determine their knowledge about and preferences for activities available at the Kirkpatrick Dam and its associated Recreation Areas, as well as upstream areas including Kenwood Landing, Eureka Dam West Landing, Ray Wayside Park, and the Silver Springs State Park.

An estimated 1.8 million people visited these sites during the two-year study period. A total of 681 groups were interviewed during February and March of each year to ascertain activities, preferences, and spending. A regional economic model was utilized by the UF team to evaluate direct and indirect contributions of these visitors to the local economy. A large majority of the respondents (89%) visited the area specifically to engage in activities associated with the rivers and reservoir. The majority (75%) had been to these sites on previous occasions, and most (82%) were only staying for one day.

Principal recreational activities included wildlife viewing, boating, paddling, fishing from a boat or shore, and sightseeing. Paddling sports were more popular during the drawdown in 2016 at Ray Wayside Park and in Silver Springs State Park.

“A free-flowing Ocklawaha will add another reason for tourists to spend time and money on fishing, camping, kayaking, hiking, birdwatching and other nature-based activities in Marion and Putnam Counties,” said Lisa Rinaman, St. Johns Riverkeeper.

Shore fishing, assumed to be for subsistence purposes, was the major activity at the Kirkpatrick Dam, while boat fishing was the main use at the Kenwood Landing location. When categorized as Rodman Reservoir vs. Ocklawaha/St. Johns River sites, visitation counts indicated that the river sites received nearly twice as much visitation.

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. Trip spending averaged about \$57 per group, roughly evenly distributed for lodging, gasoline, food, and other. Overall visitor direct expenditures were estimated at \$6 million at the reservoir sites versus almost \$20 million at the river sites.

Dr. Robert Knight, Director of the Florida Springs Institute commented “Paddle sports, including canoeing, kayaking, and paddle boarding are growing in popularity as evidenced by the booming rental business in Silver Springs State Park. Paddlers are close to the water and will greatly benefit from the increase in migratory fish in the Ocklawaha and Silver rivers, as well as renewed access to 20 additional springs when the dam is removed.”

Further acknowledgements:

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