FLORIDA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY
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March 2, 2026

Senate President Ben Albritton
409 The Capitol
404 South Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1100

SUBJECT: Please Enhance Florida's Natural Environment and Economy – Pass SB 1066

Dear President Albritton:

Florida has never been this close to approval of an environmental restoration project that would yield tremendous ecological and economic benefits to the entire northeastern quarter of the state. The Florida Native Plant Society (FNPS) asks you to help guide this project to fruition by ushering CS/CS/CS/SB 1066 to passage on the floor of the Senate so restoration of the Ocklawaha River can finally commence.

FNPS has long supported restoration for the lengthy list of positive results restoration would initiate. At least 7,500 acres – 12 square miles! – of floodplain forest would be restored, and another 7,000 acres rejuvenated. At least 20 springs, and plant-rich spring-run streams, that stopped flowing after being suffocated beneath the weight of the reservoir's water column would flow once again, allowing the largest tributary to Florida's longest river - the St Johns – to regain 150 million gallons of freshwater flow that has been robbed from the system every day since the Ocklawaha was dammed. The survival of the Florida manatee is dependent on warm water refugia provided by our springs, which will become increasingly important after the future closure of old power plants that have supplanted many of the natural sources of warm water that sustained them historically. Imagine the spectacle of Silver Springs regaining the large winter congregations of manatees that predated the blockage created by the dam!

The fisheries value of the Rodman Reservoir has often been praised and touted as sufficient reason to retain the Reservoir; however, the recreational and economic values of Rodman's fishery would be dwarfed by that of a restored Ocklawaha/St Johns system. I must confess to feeling a very personal connection to this quest to see the Ocklawaha restored. I recall my many explorations of the St Johns River as a boy growing up in Central Florida during the period immediately following construction of the dam – before the extensive grassbeds that occurred around the confluence of the St Johns and Ocklawaha, and that are so important to a healthy river, had declined in response to the huge reduction in freshwater flow wrought by the dam. I remember being awed by the sight of an 8-foot sturgeon just below Lake George and fishing in pursuit of striped bass. Alas, both those experiences are a legacy of the past. They, and other species of fish for which a free-flowing Ocklawaha served as essential spawning habitat (https://www.sportfishingmag.com/howto/jacksonville-striped-bass/), have all but vanished.

It's not possible to predict with absolute certainty how the fisheries of the St Johns and Ocklawaha would respond to restoration; however, the past fishing glories of the Ocklawaha, predictions by fisheries biologists and the rapid return of salmon runs following dam removals on rivers in the Pacific Northwest, after many decades of absence, provide some insights. One thing we do know with certainly is that the fishery and habitat values of the Rodman Reservoir decline more and more every year, and that regular drawdowns, like the one now in progress, are the only thing keeping the Rodman alive. Why not make the environmental and economic benefits of the drawdowns permanent?

You do not have to make a decision about supporting Ocklawaha restoration based solely on the words and predictions of biologists, environmental scientists and advocates for conservation and environmental protection like FNPS. An in-depth assessment by Florida Tax Watch also concluded that restoration is the environmentally and fiscally responsible choice.

Please give this important legislation the opportunity it deserves to be brought to a vote on the floor of the Senate, where you could then preside over a decision that will be celebrated by not just the Floridians of today - but by generations of future Floridians. Restoration of the Ocklawaha would be a shining testament to your legacy as President of the Florida Senate. We ask you to lead the Senate in approving CS/CS/CS/SB 1066 and assure you that FNPS stands ready to assist and support you in any way we can.

Respectfully,

Eugene M. Kelly

Eugene M. Kelly, President
Florida Native Plant Society

cc: Senator Jason Brodeur
Representative Wyman Duggan

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