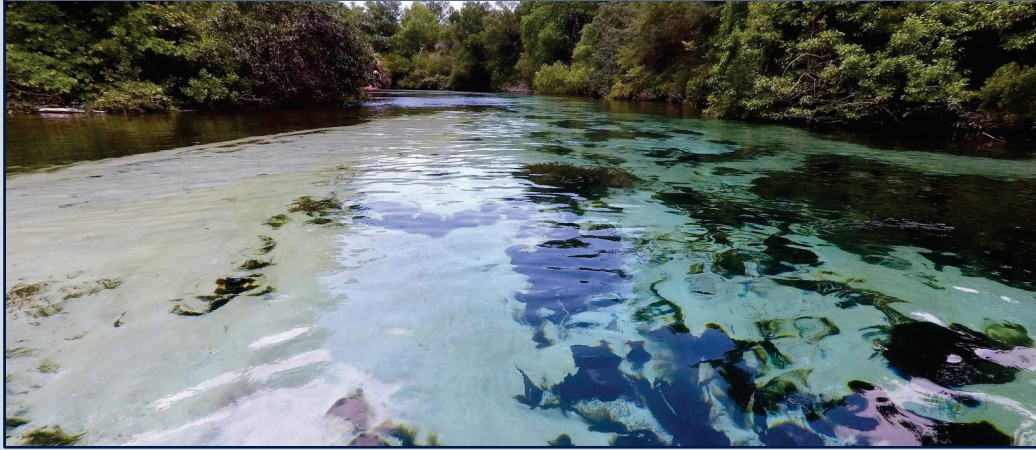


# Weeki Wachee Spring Protection Zone



Proposed Rule  
July 19, 2023

**Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission**

This presentation will discuss the request for a Spring Protection Zone for a portion of the Weeki Wachee River, and proposed restrictions of anchoring, beaching, mooring, and grounding between the spring boil and Rogers Park boat ramp canal in Hernando County.

Photo credit: Southwest Florida Water Management District

Division: Law Enforcement

Author: Major Rob Beaton, Boating and Waterways

Report Date: July 19, 2023

## Request for Weeki Wachee Spring Protection Zone

- Received from Hernando County Board of County Commissioners
- Request prohibition on anchoring, mooring, beaching and grounding
- From upstream boundary at state park corridor to Rogers Park boat ramp canal



The FWC received a request for a spring protection zone for Weeki Wachee Spring and its associated spring runs from Hernando County Board of County Commissioners.

The request is for a zone that will prohibit anchoring, mooring, beaching and grounding to protect the ecological environment including natural vegetation and wildlife.

Hernando County requested the zone extend from the upstream boundary at the state park corridor to the Rogers Park boat ramp canal.

Photo Credit: Hernando County (FL) Government

## Request for Addition to Weeki Wachee Spring Protection Zone

- The Florida Department of Environmental Protection requested the zone be extended into Weeki Wachee Springs State Park all the way to the spring boil.
- Total size of requested zone: 5.61 miles of Weeki Wachee River.



The Florida Department of Environmental Protection requested the zone be extended into the state park all the way to the spring boil.

The zone requested by Hernando County and DEP would extend from the spring boil within Weeki Wachee State Park to approximately 5.61 miles downriver. The requested zone would prohibit anchoring, mooring, beaching or grounding of vessels within the spring and the associated portions of the spring run.

## Evaluation Process

- Spring meets criteria
- River already Idle Speed/No Wake
- Evidence presented by Hernando County and interested parties
- FWC conducted site visits
- Evidence reviewed by required agencies



The Weeki Wachee Springs Complex is a first magnitude spring and meets the criteria for a Spring Protection Zone.

The section of the river under consideration is already regulated as Idle Speed/No Wake, therefore staff did not consider additional speed restrictions.

The FWC received evidence from Hernando County and other interested parties, who submitted documentation in support of the establishment of a Spring Protection Zone.

FWC staff conducted site visits to gather additional information.

The FWC, DEP, Southwest Florida Water Management District, US Army Corps of Engineers and US Coast Guard evaluated the evidence presented.

Photo Credit: FWC Flickr

## Initial Proposal – Point Bars



At the Commission's May meeting, staff recommended the establishment of spring protection zones at 20 point bars within the spring's associated spring run. Point bars are locations at a bend in the river where sediment naturally collects on the inside of the bend facing down river and deepens along the outside of the bend. Staff found evidence of harmful vessel activity occurring at these popular locations. After additional testimony from Hernando County, meetings with DEP, more evidence submitted showing harm in areas other than point bars and direction from Commissioners, staff reevaluated the combined request from Hernando County and DEP.



## Evidence of Harm

- Multiple studies
- Management plans
- Site visits
- Harm caused by vessels
- Specific areas



A number of studies were presented to the FWC in support of the establishment of a Spring Protection Zone.

Hernando County provided a 2019 vessel impact study as the groundwork for the evidentiary requirement to establish this zone, but additional studies were provided by other parties and included:

- Shoreline Erosion Impacts Study - SWFWMD, FDEP, Hernando County – Ongoing
- Weeki Wachee Springs State Park Management Plan – FDEP - 2021
- Weeki Wachee Natural System Carrying Capacity Study – Wood Environment and Infrastructure Solutions, SWFWMD, Hernando County – 2020
- Weeki Wachee Annual River Monitoring Summary – Florida Springs Institute - 2019
- Weeki Wachee River Surface Water Improvement and Management Plan – SWFWMD - 2017

Staff have reviewed the evidence and conducted site visits to gather additional information. Staff found evidence of harm occurring due to vessel activity along the spring run.

Photo credit – FWC staff

## Evidence of Harm



Images taken by FWC staff show damage to root systems along the bank of the spring run. Staff observed numerous vessels beached along the spring run and saw harm occurring to water bottom resources when those vessels beached and then returned back to the main channel.

Photo Credit: FWC staff

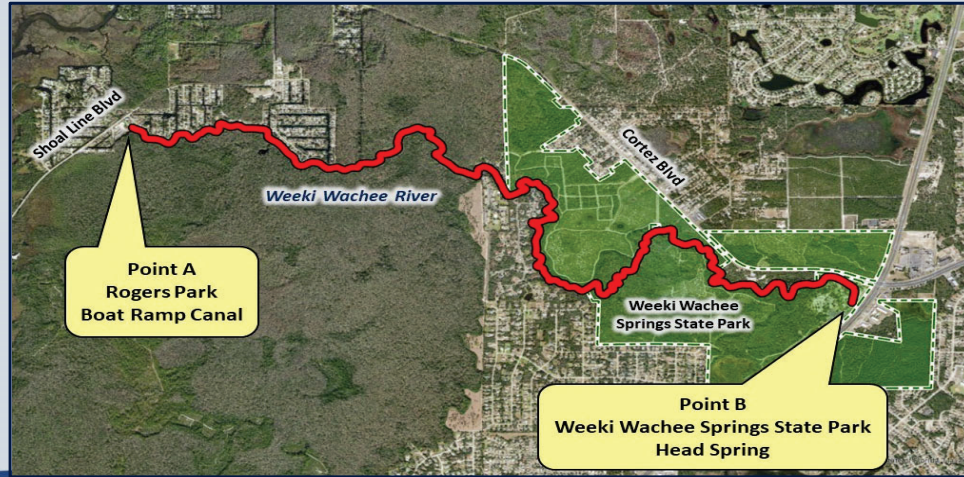
## Additional Evidence of Harm



After the May Commission meeting, the FWC received additional evidence of harm occurring to other locations along the spring run due to vessel activity. Here are two images provided by Hernando county showing harm occurring to the resource in locations other than point bars along the spring run.



## Proposed Spring Protection Zone



Staff is recommending the establishment of a unified spring protection zone which would stretch from the Rogers Park boat ramp canal to the Weeki Wachee Springs State Park Head Spring. While anchoring and mooring are already prohibited within the state park, this zone would add anchoring and grounding to prohibited vessel activities. This zone would prohibit the anchoring, beaching, grounding and mooring of vessels within this portion of the spring and spring run.

## Non-Regulated Activities



This proposed zone would only prohibit mooring, grounding, anchoring or beaching of vessels. With limited exceptions, most tubes and rafts would not be considered vessels under Florida law.

This spring protection zone would not alter the public's access to the spring or the spring's associated spring runs. However, the public would not be allowed to moor, beach, anchor or ground a vessel within the spring protection zone. The zone will not regulate the activities of people. Shown above are two activities which would not be prohibited by the proposed spring protection zone.

## Stakeholder Engagement

- Two public meetings
  - Approximately 150 attendees each
    - Outdoor recreation vendors
    - Concerned citizens
    - Government agencies
    - Nonprofits
- Wide variety of viewpoints, both in favor and in opposition
- Overall positive reception
- On-Line Comments



Given the popularity of the spring and associated spring run for outdoor recreational activities, the FWC has prioritized stakeholder engagement. Staff have conducted three public meetings about Spring Protection Zones in Hernando County, two of which were specifically for this requested Spring Protection Zone. At each meeting, approximately 150 people were present, representing a variety of viewpoints.

Adjacent landowners raised concerns regarding riparian rights, which were addressed when the applicant indicated their requested zone would not interfere with riparian rights of landowners.

Staff also addressed misconceptions that this requested zone would limit rafting, tubing or swimming or any other non-vessel related activity within the Spring Protection Zone.

Staff also received comments from the public regarding the zone being proposed today. Overall, the comments from online submissions and attendees at both public meetings were in support of the establishment of a Spring Protection Zone.

Photo Credit: FWC Staff

## Staff Recommendation

Approve and adopt proposed final rule creating a spring protection zone for the Weeki Wachee Spring and a portion of the spring run.

*If the rules are approved for both advertisement and final adoption, Commission staff will file the rules for adoption as allowed by s.120.54(3) Florida Statutes, without further public hearing, unless requested.*



Staff recommends the Commission approve and adopt the final Rules without further hearing, unless requested.