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PRESS RELEASE

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NEW BASELINE ASSESSMENT GIVES THE LOWER ICHETUCKNEE A “C-” GRADE

The Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute (FSI) released its Lower Ichetucknee Baseline Assessment report in September 2016, giving a C- grade to the Ichetucknee River ecosystem from the U.S. Highway 27 bridge to the confluence with the Santa Fe River.

The Ichetucknee Alliance is concerned that this grade reflects damage to the Ichetucknee that is caused by loss of flow and increased pollution.

“This system is not healthy,” said Dr. Robert Knight, executive director of FSI who guided the work that resulted in the baseline assessment. “If you have a sixth grader who is getting C- grades, you aren’t proud of that.”

The Alliance is particularly troubled by the river’s two “D” grades for spring discharge and nitrate levels.

“Flows are way below the historic average and are staying down,” Knight explained, “and there is no light at the end of the tunnel for them to go back up. Both the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Suwannee River Water Management District have agreed that flows are too low, but they’ve done nothing to reverse that situation by reducing the numbers of water use permits.”

Nitrate pollution in the river—which promotes algae growth and leads to murky water—continues to be high. Although not currently increasing, nitrates are twice as high as Florida’s recommended standard for springs. “Nitrates in the Ichetucknee have been at this level for years and this harms the whole ecosystem,” Knight said.

“We’re troubled by this overall grade and particularly by the D grades,” said Ichetucknee Alliance President John Jopling. “Given the importance of the Ichetucknee to Lake City, Fort White and Columbia County, given the nearly \$40 million invested in the Ichetucknee and its protection by the state, and given how much the citizens of Florida and our international visitors love the Ichetucknee, we think our state agencies need to do a much better job of protecting the springs and the river.”

Jopling acknowledged one new positive development, the establishment by the Department of Environmental Protection of a new restoration focus area in the Ichetucknee springshed. He said more efforts at protection are needed, however, given that long-term trends show declining levels of the aquifer that feeds the springs.

“The Alliance would like to see some outside-the-box thinking on behalf of the springs,” Jopling explained. “For example, our state agencies could declare a water reservation for the Ichetucknee. The district could estimate maximum sustainable groundwater withdrawals and review water use permits based on cumulative withdrawals; this would require accurate monitoring of district-wide water use. And if our legislators are truly concerned about the future of the Ichetucknee, they need to be studying tiered water use fees.”

For more information, see the report card on page 60 (pdf page number; document page number is 54) of the Lower Ichetucknee Baseline Assessment at:

[http://floridaspringsinstitute.org/resources/Pictures/Ichetucknee Baseline Assessment Final.pdf](http://floridaspringsinstitute.org/resources/Pictures/Ichetucknee%20Baseline%20Assessment%20Final.pdf)

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