

Peck Sink project proves its worth during Tropical Storm Andrea



A grate system helps to filter large items from storm water before it reaches the filtration system in the Peck Sink Preserve. OCTAVIO JONES | Times

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Gin and coffee don't mix.

Gin, of course, is the standard metaphor for pure, totally transparent water. In Florida, it usually applies to spring-fed rivers such as the Weeki Wachee. If you've ever seen a cave diver's underwater video, you know gin-clear is an even more fitting description for the source of these rivers, the Floridan Aquifer.

Coffee, or coffee-colored, refers to water that flows from the swamp. Not necessarily filthy, but full of organic matter. When water from wetlands also drains an urban area — picking up road grit and lawn chemicals — it is filthy and tends to look not just like coffee, but like the dregs of an old pot.

And that's just the kind of water I saw rushing beneath a culvert on Wiscon Road on Friday, the day after Tropical Storm Andrea dumped more than 3 inches of rain in Hernando.

Not too long ago, this water would have run directly into Peck Sink, southwest of Brooksville, and directly into the aquifer. You can imagine the hideous underwater plume, not to mention the toxins flowing into our drinking water.

You didn't have to imagine the dozens of tires and hundreds of plastic bottles carried there by the water and the old appliances unloaded there by people who no doubt figured that they might as well, because it already looked like a dump.

And now?

Now that the county has bought the sink and the surrounding 118 acres? Now that it has built ponds to purify the water?

After walking to the sinkhole on Friday with Clay Black, a county stormwater engineer, I could see that the wooden basin was litter-free. The creek flowing into it wasn't perfectly clear, but clear enough that Black said it reminded him a little of a mountain stream in his home state of Kentucky.

The Peck Sink project, in other words, is working like a champ.

The dirty water is diverted through a grate that filters out all of the big debris. It flows into one pond that allows sand and silt to settle. It flows into another one planted with cattails and pickerel weed that absorb heavy metals and a long list of other impurities you don't want anywhere near your supply of drinking water.

The system is handling the heaviest rains of the year with ease.

It seems to be a good time to remind people of this because just a year ago, after another, admittedly much heavier storm — Debby — the entire project was in danger of becoming a poster child for government waste and incompetence.

Tea partiers like county Commissioner Jim Adkins had never thought it worth spending about \$4.2 million in state and county money to buy the land and build the ponds. He helped kill the idea of spending more money on a small park around the sink — a few picnic tables, a trail, maybe a few educational signs.

After rain from Debby washed away some of the earthen banks of those new ponds, he felt vindicated.

"Told you so," he said.

Well, maybe Adkins should take a look at the sink now. So should commission Chairman David Russell, the only other sitting commissioner to vote against the park.

And maybe they should reconsider. No, the county doesn't have the money for a park now, but it can commit to building it when the funds are available. In fact, that was always the plan.

And if it is built, and kids can see the sink and learn about runoff and water treatment, maybe we won't have any future commissioners who think it's okay to let filthy runoff foul the water that we need to be pure.