

OrlandoSentinel.com

Reservoir fight: Cocoa would sell water to Orange — but for a profit

By [Kevin Spear](#), Orlando Sentinel

8:48 PM EST, January 8, 2012

As tensions in Florida rise over the control of scarce water supplies, the Brevard County city of Cocoa, a heavy user of water pumped from rural Orange County, is offering to sell the increasingly precious resource to Orange County's utility — for a profit.

The proposed deal, rejected so far by Orange officials, is just one aspect of a tangled and protracted competition over rights to pump from a little-known lake in southeast Orange and northwest Osceola counties called Taylor Creek Reservoir.

For years, Cocoa and several local governments, as well as the owner of adjoining property, have struggled to come up with an agreement for sharing the reservoir's waters.

More than any other river or lake, Taylor Creek Reservoir is being counted on to make sure there is enough water for Central Florida's population growth.

"Orange County is still working on closing the gap between all the parties in doing a regional project," said Teresa Remudo-Fries, deputy director of Orange County Utilities, who said Cocoa's demand to profit from sales of Taylor Creek Reservoir water is one of many reasons Orange has not signed on. "The details on how the business deal is going to be done are still not presented."

For nearly a decade, the 10,000-acre lake has been the leading candidate as the cleanest and cheapest new source of water for Central Florida's population growth. Most of the region now relies on wells that tap the massive Floridan Aquifer, which authorities think is now being pumped so aggressively in some areas that interconnected springs, rivers, lakes and wetlands are being harmed.

But while Cocoa, Orange County, Orlando and other local governments want Taylor Creek Reservoir water, so does the owner of all the land surrounding the lake: Deseret Ranches.

The 450-square-mile Deseret Ranches is among the nation's largest producers of cattle and has been owned for almost 60 years by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormon church.

Last week, farming partners of Deseret Ranches began planting a potato crop on several hundred acres of ranchland that will be irrigated with water from Taylor Creek Reservoir.

With Cocoa already pumping millions of gallons from Taylor Creek Reservoir, ranch managers — anxious over outsiders' efforts to claim water within their boundaries — also are seeking to expand their rights to pump water from the lake to irrigate far larger crops of potatoes, beans, wheat and corn.

But who will get to tap Taylor Creek Reservoir for more water is hard to predict. Competition and conflict over

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access to the lake include:

- A lawsuit filed by the St. Johns River Water Management District to have a judge declare that the agency has the right to access the reservoir, which was built in the 1960s by the federal government as part of an ill-fated attempt turn the nearby St. Johns River into a massive drainage ditch.
- Pending applications, requiring costly and extensive preparation, filed with the St. Johns district by Orange County Utilities and Deseret Ranches for permits to pump from the lake.
- The city of Cocoa's efforts to position itself as the sole provider of reservoir waters to Central Florida.

With local supplies contaminated by salt water, Cocoa's utility has pumped water from an increasing number of wells on Deseret Ranches property in Orange County since the 1950s. Even those wells turned somewhat salty, so the city also began to pump from the reservoir in 1999.

Cocoa, Deseret Ranches and Orlando Utilities Commission recently agreed to form a partnership to withdraw all the remaining water available in Taylor Creek Reservoir, a quest that apparently would leave the thirstiest local government — Orange County — with nothing.

To do that, the partnership must first obtain a permit from the St. Johns water district, a move that could force the district into a politically perilous task of picking sides in the competition over the reservoir.

Under the agreement, Orlando utility officials appear willing to pay Cocoa a profit for water it would provide. They did not return calls for comment.

Cocoa officials would not discuss the aspects of Taylor Creek Reservoir proposal that Orange rejected as incomplete or unacceptable.

However, Cocoa lawyer Anthony Garganese emphasized that Orange is still welcome to join the partnership.

"The memorandum of agreement between OUC and Cocoa and [Deseret] does contemplate additional parties in this regional endeavor," he said.

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