

## Tampa Bay Region

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Imagine all the water in the five Great Lakes. Now imagine even more.

The Floridan Aquifer, which underlies most of Florida and parts of southern Georgia and Alabama holds the largest supply of fresh water in the world, larger by a considerable extent than the content of the Great Lakes.

It is hard to imagine how any region lying over such an enormous supply could have a serious water shortage. But the Tampa Bay area — Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco Counties and the major cities of St. Petersburg, Clearwater and Tampa, Florida — have a water supply problem, big time. It is at the heart of a political war that has dragged on for decades and left a residue of suspicion and distrust that could last for decades more.

Years ago, Pinellas County, a spit of land nearly surrounded by the salt water of Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, exhausted the supply of potable water under its land, allowing sea water to encroach and turn the West/central edge of the Floridan Aquifer brackish. Desperate for new supplies, Pinellas and St. Petersburg bought large tracts of land in Pasco County to the north and in Hillsborough County to the east and began pumping water from under their neighbors to supply their own requirements for irrigation, car washing, cooking and drinking.



In times of drought (and even Florida has them) nature could not replenish the aquifer as fast as it was drawn down. Wetlands over and around the well fields began to dry up. Cypress trees died and toppled. Private wells dried up. Homes began to sag and collapse as the porous, empty ground beneath began to sag in on itself.

As it has in so many other areas of the world, water became a political issue. Pinellas and St. Pete could not be stopped from pumping their neighbors dry because they owned the well fields in the adjacent counties and because, together, they controlled the West Coast Regional Water Supply Authority, which controlled the distribution of water in the region.

By the mid-90s, the situation had become so intolerable, the West Coast board bowed to public pressure to set things right — somehow. But the member governments found they didn't even know how to talk to one another in a civil way, much less how to cooperate. They hired a "facilitator" to try to find some common ground. She once remarked that she wasn't even certain at any single meeting if the parties could agree to meet again.

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Then the personalities on the West Coast board began to shift. Older, deeply entrenched men with their careers invested in their positions on water gave way to young, more conciliatory voices. The mayor of St. Petersburg, David Fischer, took the place of one of his city councilman and made an extraordinary suggestion: If West Coast reorganized into a true regional water utility, he would be willing to sell all of the city's well fields, treatment plants and delivery systems to the new organization if his neighbors would do the same.

Proprietary interests would vanish. Pasco and Hillsborough said they would go along if, in addition, the new utility cut back drastically on ground-water pumping and find alternative sources of water.

It took two years of meetings, often rancorous and always running 12 to 14 hours, to hammer out the agreement. It went into effect in 1998.

Last year, the new utility, Tampa Bay Water, signed a contract for a 25-million gallon a day desalination plant. Another 60-million gallons of new supplies will come from a reservoir to be filled by skimming high water from area rivers. More desal may be in the region's future.

To be sure, the water wars of Tampa Bay are not over. Many of the personalities who forged the reorganization have gone on to other things, replaced by men and women who still have parochial agendas. The trust needed to make the regional agreement work simply does not exist. With the area growing fast, with high-tech business and water-hungry industry eyeing the region, it is critical that new water supplies be brought on line quickly before opportunities are lost.

Whether that will happen remains to be seen.