

Lake Lafayette EcoSummary



Lake Lafayette was historically a meandering, wetland/prairie lake system located in eastern Leon County, but land alterations in the mid-1900s separated the lake into four distinct sections, known as Upper Lake Lafayette (ULL), Lake Piney Z, Alford Arm, and Lower Lake Lafayette (LLL). Limited hydraulic connectivity occurs between the various sections, much of which is present only during high water elevations. Because of the compartmentalization of the four sections, each section is treated as a separate “lake” with its own watershed.

Wetland or Lake?

Lower Lake Lafayette appears and functions like a cypress dominated swamp, while Alford Arm is a combination of cypress and various emergent/floating plant species. Typical of wetlands, there is little open water at either location, and the open water that currently exists in Lower Lake Lafayette is due to Fish and Wildlife’s maintenance of the canoe trails. Due to access issues (low water and the extreme amounts of vegetation) Leon County staff have been unable to sample Alford Arm for several years and have only intermittently sampled Lower Lake Lafayette.

Background

Healthy, well-balanced lake communities may be maintained with some level of human activity, but excessive human disturbance may result in waterbody degradation. Human stressors may include increased inputs of nutrients, sediments, and/or other contaminants from watershed runoff, adverse hydrologic alterations, undesirable removal of habitat or riparian buffer vegetation, and introduction of exotic plants and animals. Water quality standards are designed to protect designated uses of the waters of the state (e.g., recreation, aquatic life, fish consumption), and exceedances of these standards are associated with interference of the designated use.

Methods

Surface water samples are collected quarterly (as field conditions allow) from ULL, Piney Z and LLL and sediment samples are collected yearly from Piney Z. This information is used to determine the health of the Lafayette system and meets the requirements of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP).

Although Alford Arm contains areas of standing water, the vast majority is covered by dense stands of both submergent and emergent wetland vegetation. Because of the dense vegetation and low water conditions, samples could not be collected for most of 2010, and no samples were collected in 2011-2015. The station was eliminated in 2015.

Upper Lake Lafayette



The typically phosphorus-limited Upper Lake Lafayette is the westernmost lake in this system. The most dominant feature of Upper Lake Lafayette is the sinkhole (Lafayette Sink) located in the northeastern portion of the lake and drains into the Floridan Aquifer. Much of the water entering Upper Lake Lafayette ultimately discharges into the sink area. As a result, the area and volume of the lake is highly variable. During typical rainfall periods, the area around Lafayette Sink becomes a 354-acre lake, but following dry periods, the lakebed can drain almost completely into the sinkhole. The heavily urbanized Northeast Drainage Ditch and Lafayette Creek are the primary sources of water for the lake. Three other minor contributing sources are two small tributaries to the north of the lake and Lake Piney Z.

Approximately 74% of the 14,792-acre Upper Lake Lafayette watershed is agriculture, rangeland, transportation, utilities, urban and residential (as shown in **Figure 1**). These types of land uses are often attributed to increases in stormwater runoff and higher nutrient loads.

The U.S. EPA established a TMDL on Upper Lake Lafayette in March 2012 that requires a 36% reduction in Total Phosphorus. Upstream of Upper Lake Lafayette is a stormwater facility

known as the Weems Pond Regional Stormwater Treatment Facility (Weems Pond). The City of Tallahassee converted Weems Pond into an alum-injection facility that was brought online in October 2015. The retrofit of the facility is hoped to reduce pollutant loads leaving the pond, which flow downstream through the Northeast Drainage Ditch and into Upper Lake Lafayette.

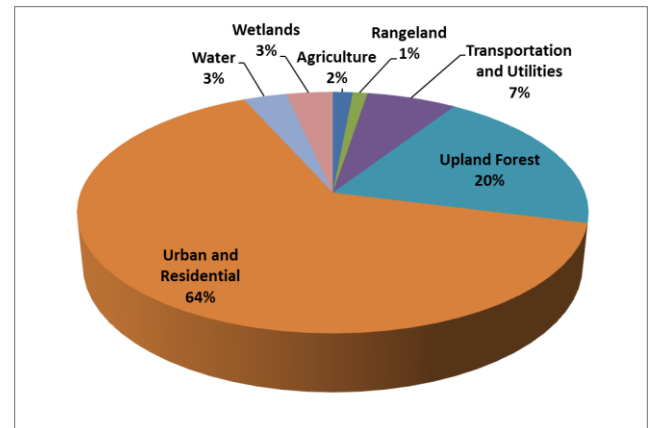


Figure 1. Upper Lake Lafayette watershed land use.

The construction of the stormwater treatment facility for a single-family subdivision immediately north of Upper Lake Lafayette is underway. The stormwater treatment facility is planned to be a wet detention facility with littoral plantings, with the discharge from the facility approximately 600 feet west of the sinkhole. The construction of this facility is challenging because an existing stream located immediately adjacent to the planned facility discharges directly into the sink. However, the facility is constructed (berm and outfall structure) in such a manner to protect the stream from additional impact of the subdivision. The construction has limited Leon County staff access to the sample location and prevented water quality sampling during the latter part of the 2021 and early 2022.

Results

Nutrients

The State of Florida uses Numeric Nutrient Criteria (NNC) to evaluate nutrients in

waterbodies. NNC thresholds are set based on waterbody-specific characteristics and are used to determine if a waterbody meets water quality standards. The results of the four quarterly samples from a single year are used to calculate the annual geometric mean. According to FDEP requirements, the NNC threshold cannot be exceeded more than once in a three-year period.

The nutrient thresholds and results for Upper Lake Lafayette are found in **Table 1**. When the NNC requirements were met, chlorophyll-a and Total Phosphorus exceeded the state criteria several times over the sampling period.

This is the result of urbanized inflow streams combined with fluctuating lake levels and rainfall. Oftentimes, the reduced lake volume concentrates incoming pollutants, thus reducing the lake’s ability to assimilate incoming nutrients. While chlorophyll-a and nitrogen levels met the NNC in 2020, Total Phosphorus levels slightly exceeded the criteria. Land clearing due to the development of the adjacent Falls Chase property prevented water quality sampling during the latter part of the 2021 and early 2022. Based on the three samples collected in 2022, the geometric means of chlorophyll-a (5.6 µg/L), Total Nitrogen (0.71 mg/L), and Total Phosphorus (0.09 mg/L) met the criteria. In 2023, only one sample could be collected. Chlorophyll-a (9.0 µg/L), Total Nitrogen (0.55 mg/L), met the criteria, while Total Phosphorus (0.13 mg/L) did not.

Chlorophyll-a data

Water quality samples collected by Leon County are analyzed by Pace Analytical Services – Ormond Beach (Pace), with the analysis results provided back to the County for submission to FDEP. In June 2022, FDEP conducted a routine audit of the chlorophyll-a data. This audit revealed that from October 2014 through December 2020, the chlorophyll-a data was

reported as “uncorrected chlorophyll-a” and not “corrected chlorophyll-a”, as it should have been. Pace has since rectified this error and beginning in January 2021, the chlorophyll-a data were properly reported as “corrected chlorophyll-a”. The laboratory also provided Leon County with the “correct chlorophyll-a” data from the affected dates and the information of this year’s Report has been changed to reflect this.

Table 1. NNC thresholds and results for ULL. Results in bold signify exceedances of the State criteria.

Clear Lake, High Alkalinity	Chlorophyll-a 20.0 µg/L	TN Threshold 1.05-1.91 mg/L	TP Threshold 0.03-0.09 mg/L
2004	2.3	0.33	0.04
2005	25.2	0.81	0.10
2006	3.3	0.56	0.09
2007	4.9	0.60	0.07
2008	24.5	0.60	0.15
2009	6.9	0.43	0.08
2010	6.9	0.77	0.07
2011	32.7	0.68	0.10
2012	31.0	0.90	0.15
2013	16.8	0.79	-
2014	-	-	-
2015	36.7	0.88	0.12
2016	-	-	-
2017	27.1	1.24	0.08
2018	-	-	-
2019	10.9	1.55	0.14
2020	5.5	0.39	0.10
2021-2023*	-	-	-

* Due to access issues or construction activities, staff could not collect the appropriate number of samples and thus could not determine the NNC.

Fish Kills

Upper Lake Lafayette has a history of fish kills. The latest reported fish kill occurred in September of 2019. Lake levels at the time of the fish kill were at the level of the sinkhole, meaning that the fish community was concentrated to a very small area. The elevated phosphorus and nitrogen levels caused increased microbial activity, then causing lower oxygen levels in the water. In this case, it was concluded that the fish, already stressed from being in a concentrated area, died mostly from low oxygen levels.

For more information regarding fish kills, please visit:

<https://myfwc.com/research/saltwater/health/abnormalities/causes/>

Other Parameters

Historically, elevated Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) results (average is 4.1 mg/L) have been an issue since Leon County sampling began in 2006 (**Figure 2**). Like the elevated nutrients and chlorophyll-a levels, urbanized inflow streams and a fluctuating lake volume

appear to be detrimentally affecting water quality.

Escherichia coli (*E. coli*)

The *E. coli* water quality limit of > 410 in 10% of samples collected over a thirty-day period was exceeded during the 4th quarter sampling event in 2022 (430 CFU) and the 2nd quarter of 2023 (900 CFU). Based on anthropogenic land use, the exceedance could possibly be the result of development in the watershed. Or, based on the abundance of wildlife in the area, the exceedance could be the result of wild animals.

Conclusions

Upper Lake Lafayette has a history of elevated nutrients, chlorophyll-a levels and microbial activity and continues to not meet the NNC. Fish kills continue to occur with the latest reported fish kill occurring in September of 2019. The *E. coli* water quality limit was exceeded during the 2nd quarter sampling event. Urbanized inflow streams combined with fluctuating lake volume exacerbated the various challenges that Upper Lake Lafayette continues to have.

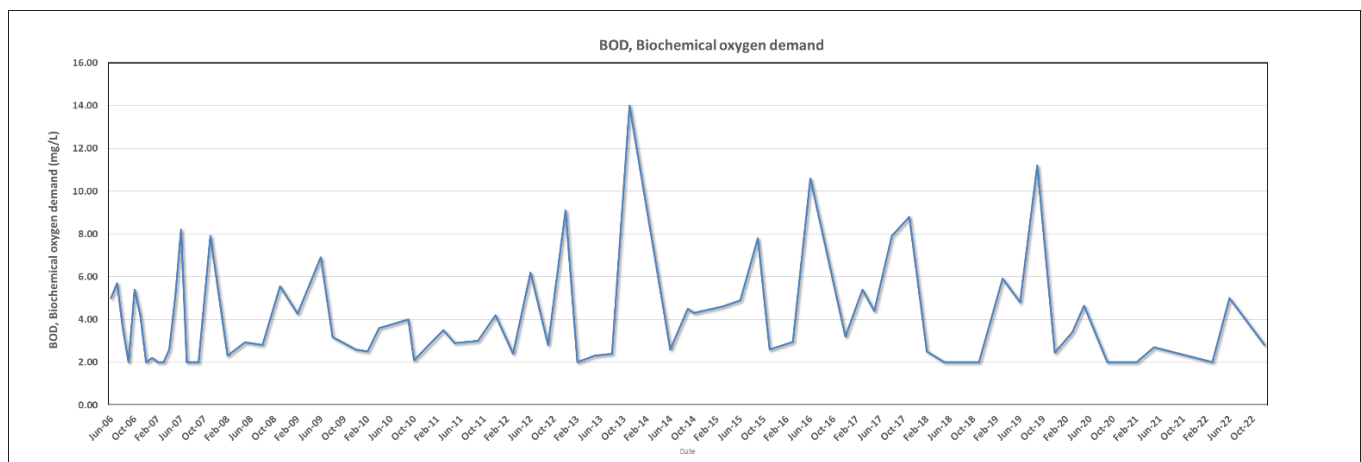
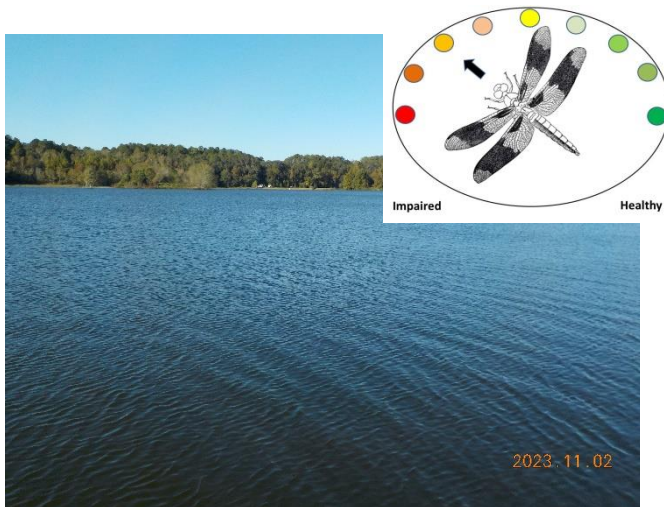


Figure 2. BOD results for Upper Lake Lafayette.

Lake Piney Z



Lake Piney Z is a 228-acre waterbody located between Upper Lake Lafayette and Lower Lake Lafayette which consists primarily of an open water system, although substantial stands of vegetation were historically present within the lake.

Approximately 45% of the 691-acre Piney Z watershed is agriculture, rangeland, transportation, utilities, urban and residential (as shown in **Figure 3**). Increases in stormwater runoff and waterbody nutrient loads can often be attributed to these types of land uses.

Lake Piney Z can discharge to Lower Lake Lafayette via two outfalls located on the east end of the lake and/or discharge to Upper Lake Lafayette via a ditch and outfall located on the west side of the lake. Lake Piney Z receives stormwater inflow from the Piney Z Plantation development and the Swift Creek Middle School stormwater pond on its northern shore, from a few holding ponds near the southern portion of the lake and from the dirt road that surrounds the lake.

In 1997, Lake Piney Z was drawn down and organic matter was scraped from the bottom and used to construct fishing fingers extending north from the southern bank. Following construction

of the fishing fingers, the lake was restocked with game fish. Currently, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, in cooperation with the City of Tallahassee, manage Piney Z as a Fish Management Area.

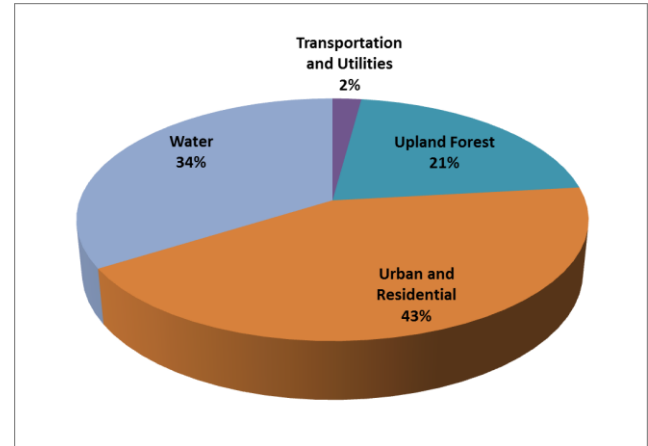


Figure 3. Lake Piney Z watershed land use.

Results

Nutrients

The nutrient thresholds and results are found in **Table 2**. The Lake Piney Z chlorophyll-a and nutrient values regularly exceeded the NNC during the period of record.

Past excessive chlorophyll-a and nutrient levels are the result of past lake management practices. The overuse of herbicides and the addition of grass carp to Piney Z have led to an almost completely open water system. Nutrients are being assimilated by algae instead of being taken up by vascular plants, leading to massive and long-lasting algal blooms. Fortunately, management practices have changed, most notably with the replanting of emergent vegetation and the reestablishment of other native vegetation via the natural seedbank. With recent lower levels of chlorophyll-a and nitrogen, it is hoped that long term ecosystem health will continue to improve.

Table 2. NNC thresholds and results for Lake Piney Z. Results in bold signify exceedances of the State criteria.

Clear Lake, Low Alkalinity	Chlorophyll-a 6.0 µg/L	TN Threshold 0.51-0.93 mg/L	TP Threshold 0.01-0.03 mg/L
2004	6.5	0.45	0.04
2005	13.0	0.78	0.05
2006	25.2	0.70	0.08
2007	3.0	0.96	0.04
2008	8.8	0.73	0.04
2009	4.43	1.33	0.06
2010	17.2	1.06	0.07
2011	36.4	1.28	0.08
2012	32.6	1.65	0.06
2013*	27.0	1.12	-
2014	2.70	1.05	0.04
2015	9.0	0.67	0.04
2016*	-	-	-
2017	9.5	1.01	0.05
2018	6.5	0.84	0.04
2019	9.3	0.87	0.05
2020*	-	-	-
2021	1.9	0.58	0.03
2022	5.8	0.82	0.04
2023	4.5	0.68	0.04

* Due to low water levels or access issues, staff could not collect the appropriate number of samples and thus could not determine the NNC.

Floral Assessment

The Lake Vegetation Index (LVI) score for Piney Z was 51, placing the lake’s vegetative community in the Healthy category.

Fifty-five species were found during the survey. Watershield (*Brasenia schreberi*), American lotus (*Nelumbo lutea*), fragrant waterlily (*Nymphaea odorata*), and pickerelweed

(*Pontederia cordata*) were the most dominant species at the lake.

Other native vegetation included buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and maidencane (*Panicum hemitomon*).

Unfortunately, water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*), hydrilla (*Hydrilla verticillata*) wild taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), Peruvian primrose willow (*Ludwigia peruviana*) torpedo grass (*Panicum repens*), and Chinese tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*), all listed as Category I Invasive Exotics by the Florida Exotic Pest Control Council were found in or along the shoreline of Piney Z. Alligator weed (*Alternanthera philoxeroides*) a Category II Invasive Exotic, and Cuban bulrush (*Oxycaryum cubense*) were two other exotic plants found in Lake Piney Z.

For more information concerning Florida Invasive Exotics, please click on the Florida Exotic Pest Control Council website; <http://www.fleppc.org/>.

[Click here for more information on the Lake Piney Z LVI.](#)

[Click here for more information on common exotic and invasive plants in Leon County wetlands and waterbodies.](#)

Fish Consumption Advisory

The Florida Department of Health has issued consumption limits for certain fish in Lake Piney Z due to elevated levels of mercury.

[Click here for more information about fish consumption advisories.](#)

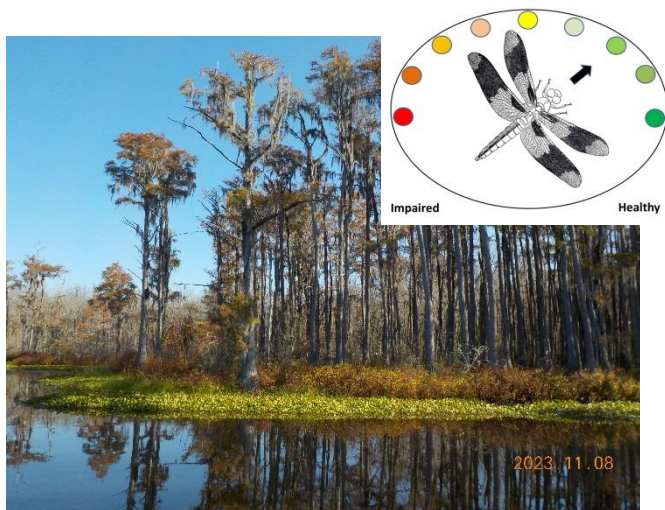
Other Parameters

Other water quality parameters appear to be normal for the area and no other impairments were noted.

Conclusions

Based on ongoing sampling, Lake Piney Z did not meet the nutrient threshold for phosphorus for the East Panhandle Region, but nutrient and chlorophyll-a levels appear to be decreasing. Fortunately, lake management practices have changed, most notably with the replanting of emergent vegetation and the reestablishment of other native vegetation via the natural seedbank. The LVI score for Piney Z was 51, placing the lake's vegetative community in the Healthy category. Other water quality parameters appear to be normal for the area and no other impairments were noted.

Lower Lake Lafayette



Lower Lake Lafayette is the largest of the four lake compartments, covering an area of 1,006 acres and bordered by the Leon County Apalachee Regional Park Solid Waste Facility, Talquin Electric Sewage Treatment Plant and various residential and commercial

developments. Lower Lake Lafayette is also home to a wood stork colony.

Approximately 54% of the 36,966-acre Lower Lake Lafayette watershed is agriculture, rangeland, transportation, utilities, urban and residential (as shown in **Figure 4**). Increases in stormwater runoff and waterbody nutrient loads can often be attributed to these types of land uses.

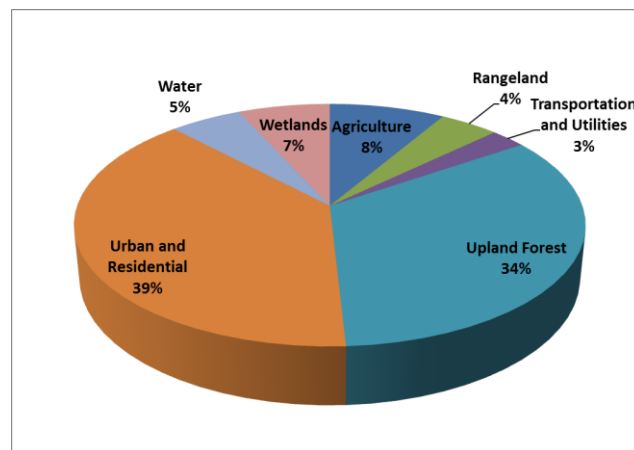


Figure 4. Lower Lake Lafayette watershed land use.

Water from Alford Arm enters Lower Lake Lafayette via pipes located under the FGA railroad track. Discharges from Lower Lake Lafayette occur through an earthen channel on the eastern end of the lake and pass under Chaires Crossroad before entering the wetland system associated with the St. Marks River. Depending on water levels, water from the St. Marks River will flow into Lower Lake Lafayette.

Lake or Wetland?

Lower Lake Lafayette has gradually transitioned from a lake to what appears and functions like a cypress dominated swamp. Florida Administrative Code 62-302(16) defines a lake as “. . . a lentic fresh waterbody with a relatively long water residence time and an open water area that is free from emergent vegetation under typical hydrologic and climatic conditions. Aquatic plants, as defined in subsection 62-

340.200(1), F.A.C., may be present in the open water.” As **Figure 5** shows, there is little open water; the open water that currently exists is due to Fish and Wildlife’s maintenance of the canoe trails.

Due to access issues (low water and the extreme amounts of vegetation) Leon County staff have only been able to intermittently sample the system.

Results

Nutrients

The nutrient thresholds and results are found in **Table 3**. The NNC thresholds were not exceeded during the period of record.

Other Parameters

Due to the wetland like nature of Lower Lake Lafayette, dissolved oxygen (DO) levels can be very low. Staff considers the low DO levels normal for this type of system (**Figure 6**).

Other water quality parameters appear to be normal for the area and no other impairments were noted.

Conclusions

When the sampling requirements were met, State criteria were not exceeded for the NNC. Due to

the wetland like nature of Lower Lake Lafayette, Staff considers the lake’s low DO levels normal for this type of system.

Table 3. NNC thresholds and results for Lower Lake Lafayette.

Colored Lakes	Chlorophyll-a 20.0 µg/L	TN Threshold 1.27-2.23 mg/L	TP Threshold 0.05-0.16 mg/L
2004	3.0	0.49	0.02
2005	2.9	0.56	0.02
2006	2.3	0.72	0.03
2007	1.9	0.62	0.02
2008	-	-	-
2009	2.2	0.42	0.02
2010	2.6	0.53	0.01
2011-2015*	-	-	-
2016	6.3	0.52	0.02
2017	2.4	0.64	0.02
2018-2022*	-	-	-
2023	4.8	0.58	0.05

* Due to low water levels and the plethora of vegetation, staff could not collect the appropriate number of samples and thus could not determine the NNC.

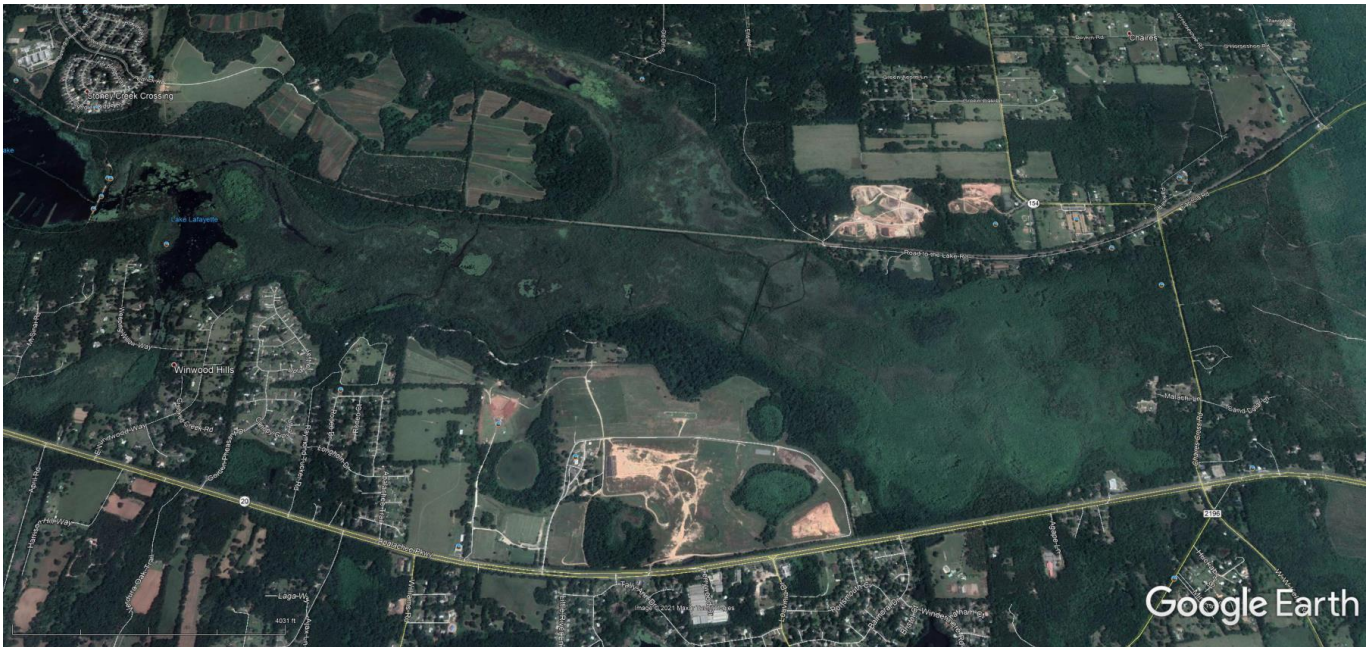


Figure 5. Lower Lake Lafayette.

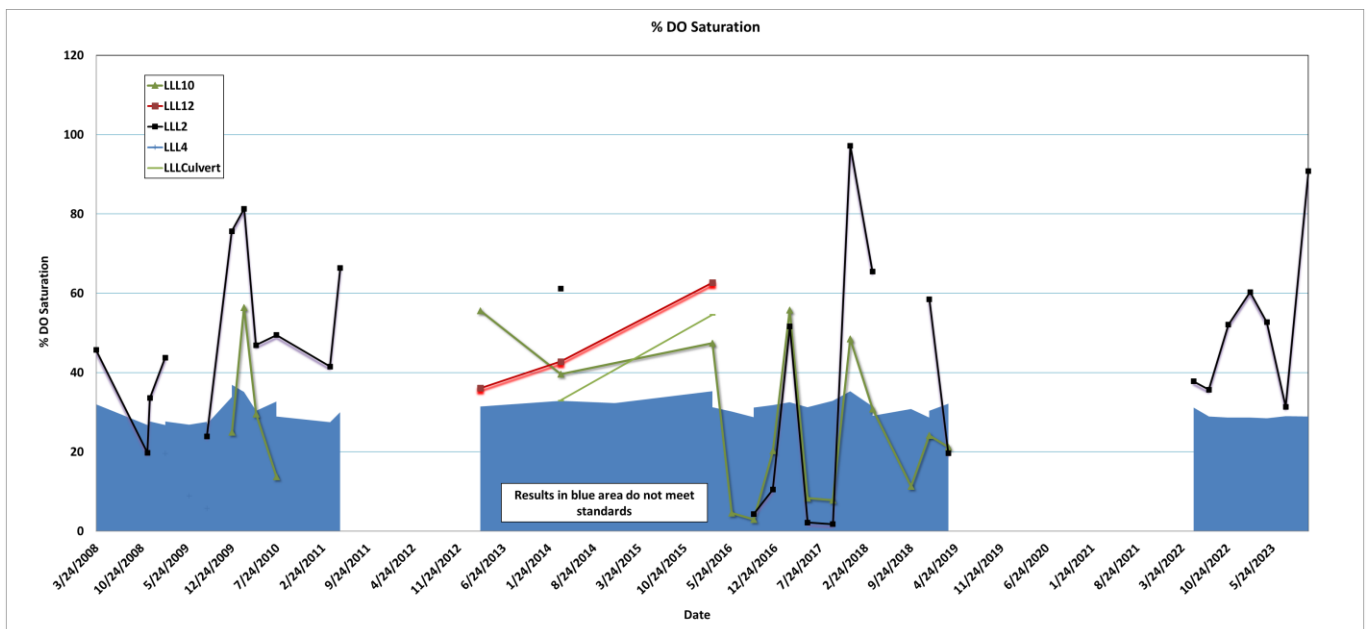


Figure 6. Dissolved Oxygen Percent Saturation results for Lower Lake Lafayette. The data gaps reflect low (or no) water in the system at that time.

Alford Arm



Alford Arm is a 371-acre waterbody which was separated from Lower Lake Lafayette by construction of the FGA Railroad. Approximately 55% of the 30,116-acre Alford Arm watershed is agriculture, rangeland, transportation, utilities, urban and residential (as shown in **Figure 7**). Low water crossings constructed in the 1950's affected water flow through the system. Increases in stormwater runoff and waterbody nutrient loads can often be attributed to these types of land uses.

Although Alford Arm contains areas of standing water, the vast majority is covered by dense stands of both submergent and emergent wetland vegetation.

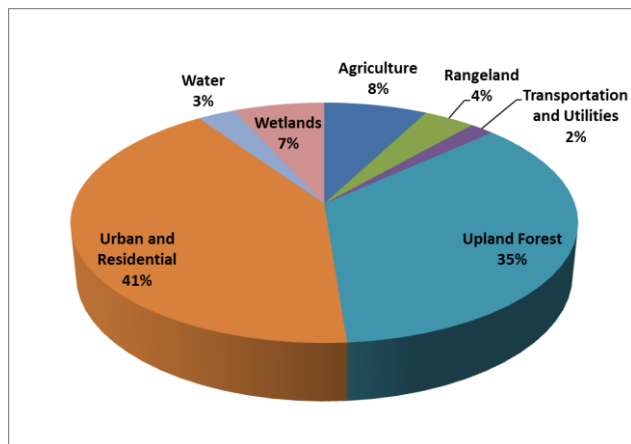


Figure 7. Alford Arm watershed land use.

Because of the dense vegetation and low water conditions, samples could not be collected for most of 2010, and no samples were collected in 2011 through 2014. Because of ongoing conditions, staff eliminated this sampling station in 2015.

Thank you for your interest in maintaining the quality of Leon County's water resources. Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions.

Contact and Resources for More Information

www.LeonCountyWater.org

[Click here to access the results for all water quality stations sampled in 2023.](#)

[Click here for map of watershed – Sample sites L02, L30, LPZ3, LLL2, LLL3, and LLL10.](#)

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