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Guest Opinion: [Bob Janes](#)

## DRGR is presenting big challenge for Lee

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The Density Reduction Groundwater Resource area is a planning and socio-economic challenge for Lee County. It is a matter of immediate importance and should be handled with diplomacy and intelligence as well as a deep respect for Lee County's natural resources.

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As elected leaders, we are the caretakers of our future. We are responsible for making sure that we always have drinking water, and that the quality of life for our children and their children is guaranteed by our efforts to protect nature and water in perpetuity.

Along with the city of Bonita Springs, Lee County governs a 96,000-acre swath of upland, wetlands, and environmentally sensitive areas that are designated DRGR. Development within the DRGR is limited to 1 to 10 housing units per acre and agricultural and mining operations.

This special land-use category, while intended to protect groundwater resources for the region, created a de facto mining district in Lee County similar to the Lake Belt area in Miami-Dade County, but without a comprehensive plan to provide for wetland mitigation.

In 2004, a federal judge revoked a permit for a 6,000-acre mine site in Lee's DRGR. The case was similar to the Lake Belt decision, as the judge ruled that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had not adequately considered habitat issues related to the Florida panther.

So, in an effort to come up with a planning tool for the DRGR that will try to protect all of the resources and interests there, the county has placed a temporary moratorium on mining and major development. The moratorium will give the county time to build a management tool.

The ultimate goal in planning for the DRGR is to balance the needs of the present while preserving the resource for the future. The subcommittee for the DRGR is being formed under Director Mary Gibbs, Department of Community Development. This process is in its infancy. However, some ideas have been brought forward for discussion by the Smart Growth Committee and its director, Wayne Daltry.

One of those points was to allow already permitted mines to continue in the DRGR, but to prohibit permitting new mines. The extraction of the mined materials is of some value to the Florida Department of Transportation for road projects.

Some independent reports state that except for the Alico Road, Rinker Mining Complex, other Lee County mines do not produce certified aggregates for FDOT but instead produce lime rock and commercial aggregates. The reports state that the Rinker mine extracts its material from an area of unusually hard rock, and that Tamiami limestone — which is primarily what is found in Lee and Collier Counties — is soft throughout its range and is only good for lime rock and fill. If these statements prove true, Lee and Collier counties are not the answer to FDOT's problems.

Mining does change the topography and hydrology of the land by taking what was once sheet flow over a flat surface and turning into an altered, man-made lake or holding pond. To mitigate, newly created and unnatural lakes should be planted with large amounts of native grasses, shrubs and trees to mimic a natural system. Pollutants must be cleaned up by the mining company and soil and water remediation should take place before the companies abandon the site.

Developers who own property in DRGR could take a land trade for other sites and could be given incentives for developing infill or non-environmentally sensitive areas. There are agricultural interests in the DRGR, too, and incentives could be given to farmers who choose to grow organic or implement other green farming practices so that the pesticides and herbicides don't impact the water table.

The many interests of and for the DRGR can be met and protections can be mandated for the future with teamwork, compromise and a willingness to be innovative, and with hard work. This is an exciting challenge for Lee County; let's leave a sustainable legacy that we can be proud of.

— Bob Janes is Lee County commissioner, District 1

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