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LOCAL

Should Silver Glen Springs be protected from boaters? The debate rages on.



Julie Garisto

Leesburg Daily Commercial

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Silver Glen Springs Recreation Area, a popular swimming and boating destination, is facing environmental damage due to increased boating activity.

The Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission is considering a Springs Protection Zone (SPZ) to restrict boating in the area, but local officials are seeking alternative solutions.

Opponents of the SPZ argue it would harm local businesses and that boaters are not solely responsible for the damage, while proponents believe it's necessary to protect the spring's ecosystem.

A final decision on the SPZ is expected after upcoming commission workshops and meetings in May.

OCALA NATIONAL FOREST — With shimmering turquoise water surrounded by lush oaks and towering pines, Silver Glen Springs Recreation Area offers swimming, picnicking areas and a primitive hiking trail loop that cuts through trees with bald eagle nests and wildlife habitats. On the hike, you can enjoy an amazing view of Lake George.

Famed author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings even mentions "the Glen" in her classic novel, "The Yearling," which was adapted into an Oscar-winning film starring Gregory Peck.

Silver Glen's pristine swimming area is still a favorite for swimming and picnicking and has grown in popularity thanks to social media. Visitors pay upwards of \$12 admission to visit.

Just beyond the buoys that rope off the Glen's swimming area, the spring run attracts beer can-popping boaters who crank up loud music, tie their boat to fragile branches, and anchor to a delicate sandy floor, where archaeologists uncover fossils and indigenous relics.

"There are just a few bad actors," Lake County Commissioner Leslie Campione said of the rambunctious partiers during a phone call with the Daily Commercial.

Campione said she grew up motoring there with her family and insists that boaters, more often than not, are "conscientious and clean up after themselves" and try not to cause damage to the area.

Scientists investigated the Silver Glen run and found evidence that boating-related activity has affected the area.

As a result, the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission is considering whether to designate Silver Glen Springs a Springs Protection Zone (SPZ) that would keep boaters away from the Glen run.

Campione says the SPZ is "extreme." She and other elected officials from Marion and Volusia County are trying instead to come up with locally enforced ordinances as part of an interlocal agreement. She said specifics should be outlined at a Lake County Commission meeting later this month.

Some background: The FWC established SPZs as designated areas around a natural spring to protect the spring's ecosystem by restricting boating activity such as anchoring, mooring or beaching vessels. The goal is to prevent damage to the delicate vegetation and aquatic life within the spring area.

"We're really trying to come up with practical solutions without having to do something as extreme as a spring protection zone," Campione emphasized.

Facebook commenters disagree: "The Glen is overrun every weekend with disrespectful boaters, jet skiers, drunks and novice boaters that play bumper boats,"

one user posted.

Established SPZs in Florida include Nichols Springs in Sumter County and Weeki Wachee in Hernando.

Implementing the SPZ in Silver Glen Springs would not cause the closure of the swimming area, though detractors often use language such as "closing the springs" to reinforce their argument.

At a public meeting in Astor on Feb. 20, a representative of the FWC gave a detailed presentation and showed examples of erosion, deterioration in soil quality and a depletion of vegetation where boats dock.

Campione spoke out against Silver Glen's proposed protections along with Marion County Commissioner/Vice Chairman Carl Zalak and all seven of the Volusia County Council.

Their sentiments were echoed by a procession of locals, but crowds on both sides of the issue packed the Astor community center last week.

Residents in orange shirts who formed the Facebook group Save Our Boating Rights Florida were among many clustering inside the crowded facility.

"Save Our Boating Rights Florida (SOBR-FL) is actively advocating for an SPZ Amendment Rule Change to protect fair, science-based boating regulations while promoting conservation and recreation," the group's Facebook page says.

One citizen called into question whether boaters have caused the extent of damage required to establish the SPZ when there's damage from recent storms and inflow from rivers and lakes in the area. Others cried out against the losses it would cause the local businesses in the area that depend on visiting boaters.

"This is not a boomtown, by any stretch," said Volusia County District 1 Council member Don Dempsey. "I mean, the biggest part of their economy is the Glen. If you kill that, we may end up a ghost town. And it's just not fair to these people."

A citizen on the protection side of the issue asked why Astor couldn't just "pivot" to offer other ecotourism experiences and not only rely on boating when the area has much more to offer.

Silver Glen is at an apex, of sorts, of three Florida counties. The run itself is in Lake County's jurisdiction, and the recreation area is in Marion County (but managed by the forestry service, which leases to a private company to provide recreation amenities). Volusia is just a few miles southeast.

As a result of its crossroads location of sorts, Silver Glen attracts visitors from across the state who wade and swim in its famously sparkly pool that, for the most part, lives up to its name.

The decision to establish the SPZ is still pending for Silver Glen. FWC expects to make the determination after upcoming commission workshops and meetings in Ocala, scheduled for May 21-22.

What led up to the meeting? A working group of members from state and federal agencies, technical experts, NGOs, businesses, and boating advocacy groups met twice last year to determine the extent of damage and if establishing an SPZ would mitigate problems.

One option: limiting overnight anchoring within the spring.

"This was a significant issue for boat rental companies whose clients enjoy anchoring for multiple days in the spring," the FWC reported.

A fee structure for boaters would be dedicated to ongoing spring restoration efforts and a vessel sticker or annual pass to allow anchoring or use of the springs were among the topics discussed. Funds collected from those would also be used for ongoing spring restoration efforts.

The group also mulled over allowing only pole anchors for vessels, a suggestion Marion County Commissioner Zalak mentioned in a phone call to the Daily

Commercial.

Pole anchoring within Silver Glen Springs would likely mitigate effects from anchoring, the group determined, but FWC legal advisers said that types of anchors are not carved out in statute, so prohibiting or allowing certain types of anchors is not legally feasible at this point.

"Let's try power poles for a year and see what happens," Zalak proposed. "I think a legitimate capacity study should be done that says, OK, this many boats can be handled in the spring or on the run during these holiday weekends when you might see hundreds of them, right?"

Creating rules for boaters can get complicated. "Florida Statutes would have to define 'pole anchor' and allow it to be singled out as an anchoring type," the FWC's report said.

Chloe Dougherty, communications director of the Florida Springs Council, said the SPZ is an "effective tool that the state already has in its toolbox."

Zalak disagrees: "Unfortunately, the state only has a hammer, really a sledgehammer, they can use."

Dougherty said that the Florida Springs Council does work with lawmakers to find solutions, but the SPZ is its official recommendation.

More environmental news: FWC to hold virtual meeting to discuss black bear hunt. What we know.

"Based on the evidence that we saw, I think it's clear that we need to take action to protect Silver Glen for future generations," Dougherty told the Daily Commercial.

Floridians who grew up here know that springs aren't forever. Luminous pools in Tampa (Sulphur Springs) and a famous pool in White Springs that once drew crowds a century ago have been irreversibly polluted and drained to nonexistence since their splashy heyday.

