Critical Information: What Really Happened at the Excavation Collapse & What We Must Do

Dear Stop the Sand Mine Group,

We now have critical new information about the October 24th excavation collapse — information that directly contradicts what our politicians and the governing agencies saying as well as what the Citrus Chronicle reported or omitted. The facts show that this was not stormwater, not a “pond footprint,” and not a minor construction mishap. This was a **groundwater breach** in one of the most vulnerable aquifer zones in all of Florida.

Because of this, and because the Chronicle article repeated claims that are misleading, inaccurate and failed to even locate the correct sand mine site, we want to set the record straight. It is more important than ever that **every single one of us calls or emails Governor DeSantis immediately.**

Below we have included our full rebuttal to our politicians, agencies and the newspaper and the updated evidence. To make the situation unmistakably clear:

- Water surged upward from the bottom of a 10–20 ft pit with **no rainfall**
- FDOT’s own engineer confirmed the excavation went **below the water table**
- FDOT drilled a new groundwater well **three days after the collapse**

- The collapse occurred **just a few hundred feet from the Southworth sand mine property** — the very land FDOT is trying to purchase and operate as a borrow pit
- The area is inside the **Kings Bay Outstanding Florida Spring Priority Focus Area**

Your voice matters right now

Governor DeSantis' office is listening. They have acknowledged our concerns, and they know this issue is gaining momentum. But they need to hear from **all of us** if we want to stop FDOT from turning this land into a sand mine.

You can now find **email scripts, call scripts, all addresses, and phone contact information on our website**:

StopTheSandMine.com → How to Help

We've made it simple, fast, and powerful.
Please take a moment today to send your email or make your call — and encourage your neighbors to do the same.

The truth matters. Our water matters. And together, we can stop this sand mine.

Please do this today.
Please ask your neighbors to do the same.
Our water, our springs, and our taxpayer dollars are at stake — and the state needs to hear us loud and clear.

Tell them: NO sand mine on the Southworth property and NO sand mines along the SunCoast corridor.

Florida's water, aquifer, springs, and taxpayer dollars are at risk.

Let's do this Together, we absolutely can stop this!

12/7/25 FDOT/ Political /Mike Arnold Rebuttal Groundwater Breach, Not Stormwater: The Facts Behind the October 24th Excavation Collapse

It's hard to find much truth in Mike Arnold's Citrus Chronicle article, *"State: Flooded Excavator was working in a permitted stormwater pond, not unapproved borrow pit,"* published December 4, 2025. Mr. Arnold did not even identify the Southworth sand mine location correctly. (See SWFWMD inspector map.) The actual site is on the **right side of the SunCoast**, only a **few hundred feet** from the excavation and ground-collapse incident. Mr. Arnold also repeats the claim that a "SWFWMD inspector… found no signs of illicit digging at the unpermitted borrow pit." Yet these are the **only** detailed comments made by the inspector:

- "Was unable to find signs of construction activity on the borrow pit parcel, or related to the borrow pit."
- "The excavator 'hole' was within the SunCoast Parkway permit area and is related to pond 3-3B."

- “Photos in relation to the ‘excavator hole’ in question. Water was not blue or clear. Location on map shows the photos in relation to the borrow pit permit area.”

These minimal observations — with no analysis and no professional conclusions — are not evidence of anything. Yet the article presents them as if they resolve the groundwater breach.

That’s the entire detailed report on this incident, along with five total pictures — three showing a large hole filled with water, with not a soul or any machinery on site. There are **no findings, no conclusions, and no analysis** in the report. Even more concerning, the inspector who wrote it is **not qualified** to evaluate a groundwater breach. After speaking at length with a SWFWMD representative, we were told directly that this inspector has **no hydrogeological background** and is **not an engineer** of any kind. In other words, he was not equipped to determine whether this incident involved groundwater, stormwater, or aquifer exposure.

Why, then, did SWFWMD send an unqualified inspector **on a Saturday**, more than **two weeks after** the collapse, when no contractors were present, no one could be questioned, and all equipment had already been removed? Why was no qualified hydrologist or engineer sent immediately after the excavator became submerged? These decisions raise serious red flags.

The incident occurred on **October 24th**, and the excavator remained underwater until **November 4th**. Yet the very agencies responsible for protecting our water did not appear on site until long after the fact, when there was virtually nothing left to observe. **This delay, combined with the lack of qualified evaluation, only reinforces our concern that agencies may be attempting to mislead the public about what actually happened.**

What concerns us even more is that the Chronicle article now reflects almost word for word the same narrative several of our elected officials have been repeating publicly. When a newspaper prints incomplete or inaccurate information, and that information mirrors the talking points used by political leaders, the public is left with the false impression that the groundwater breach has been properly investigated and explained. It has not. Instead, the article reinforces a version of events that minimizes the seriousness of what occurred and overlooks key technical facts that state agencies themselves have documented.

This is why we believe it is essential that our elected officials receive the full, accurate record of what happened, not the simplified version presented in the Chronicle.

Martinez Tarokh, spokesperson for SWFWMD, stated that, "**the water surge that overtook the machine** was not a groundwater blowout, but the result of work within an approved stormwater pond footprint." But **stormwater cannot surge upward from the bottom of a 10–20 ft pit with no rainfall**. The conditions described by SWFWMD are physically inconsistent with what occurred on October 24th.

FACTS:

- **There was no rainfall** during or before the collapse.
- FDOT's own accident photos show water **rising from the bottom of the excavation**, not flowing in from the sides.
- The excavation walls show **sloughing and collapse**, consistent with groundwater inflow under hydraulic pressure.
- The pit filled — and has **remained full for weeks**, even without rain.

- **FDOT requested a NEW WELL** three days after the accident, approximately 650 feet away.
  New wells are installed for groundwater monitoring, water quality evaluation, or drawdown assessment after incidents involving potential aquifer impacts. In a karst aquifer, this may indicate concern about preferential flow paths or new hydraulic connections. We are also concerned by the presence of **tankers drawing water** from this well. SWFWMD told us no Water Use Permit exists for this withdrawal, and we are confirming this information.

- Juan Cardenas, P.E., Superior Construction project manager, confirmed in writing that the excavation **filled with groundwater** after the excavator became stuck.
  This was "expected," he wrote, because the excavation bottom was at elevation **0' to -1'**, while the groundwater table in that area is typically between **3' and 4'**.
  This means the digging penetrated below the local water table, allowing groundwater to flow directly into the pit — a clear hydrological interaction, not a stormwater event.

While Stop the Sand Mine understands that the long-range plan for this location is that it will eventually be a "drainage basin," it is not plausible that the October 24th excavation was part of a "stormwater pond footprint," as SWFWMD's spokesperson claimed. A pond footprint is not a pond, and nothing about this excavation matches the characteristics of a stormwater facility.

In reality, FDOT was not excavating a stormwater pond or drainage basin at this location. The evidence is clear:

- A legitimate drainage basin does not have vertical walls 10–20 feet deep; it has gentle 3:1 or 4:1 slopes. The 10–20 ft walls were documented by the Citrus County Department of Health.
- There was no stormwater infrastructure present.
- There was no pond liner, no berm, no embankment, and no preparation for water storage.

- The land was dry upland sand prior to excavation, not a partially developed stormwater facility.
- The photos taken do not resemble a drainage basin under construction.

For these reasons, we reject the misleading narrative being put out by FDOT, SWFWMD, and political leaders who have repeated these claims without verifying the facts.

Stop the Sand Mine does not dispute that the incident occurred within FDOT's right of way and under the existing SunCoast permit for that corridor.

However, FDOT is not operating at the "higher standard" it frequently claims in public statements. FDOT has repeatedly stated — including in the 2024 SEIR report — that a federal 404 Water Permit was "obtained."

This is not true.

FDOT does **not** have a 404 permit.
FDOT has a **No Permit Required (NPR)** letter.

That NPR letter allowed FDOT to bypass the **only federal regulatory process** that would have evaluated impacts to the aquifer, springs, groundwater, and wetlands. As a result, FDOT is now moving forward with plans that would destroy **Wetland H** — with **zero** aquifer or groundwater analysis required.

And Wetland H is just the beginning. More than **70 acres of wetlands** along SunCoast Parkway Sections 3A and 3B are being dismissed as "isolated" and "non-jurisdictional," meaning they receive **no federal protection at all**, despite their location within an Outstanding Florida Spring Priority Focus Area.

The SWFWMD spokesperson quoted in the Chronicle stated, "We found no evidence of water quality contamination and confirmed that

the construction was authorized under the SunCoast permit," and further announced that the District would "not prepare a formal report beyond the photo documentation." As SWFWMD is "Coordinating with the Florida Turnpike Authority." The entire SWFWMD response consists of **five sentences** and **five photos** — three of a deep water-filled pit with 10–20 ft vertical walls, and two simply showing its location. That is not a meaningful investigation into a groundwater breach.

Even more concerning, **why would SWFWMD be "coordinating with the Florida Turnpike Authority"** at all? SWFWMD or FDEP should be the **independent oversight body** for an incident involving potential aquifer exposure. SWFWMD is the agency responsible for overseeing the ERP for the sand mine and for "investigating" the excavation incident. It does **not seem appropriate for the regulatory agency to be "coordinating" with FDOT or the Florida Turnpike Authority**, the very entities whose excavation activity triggered the groundwater breach.

Neither agency appeared on site within days of the collapse; instead, weeks later they issued minimal documentation that does little more than appease public concern.

We still have no answers on the water samples:

- Why haven't the water samples been released publicly by any agency?
- Why were they reportedly not shared with the Citrus County Department of Health?
- Why were samples collected by the **contractor**, rather than by an independent agency, as FDEP acknowledged?

Without transparency on **when**, **where**, and **how** these samples were collected, the public cannot have any confidence that they came from the incident site at all. The pattern is deeply troubling. Instead of enforcing environmental protections, agencies and elected officials appear to be bending over backwards to shield FDOT/FTE from scrutiny — rather than protecting our water, springs, and aquifer.

Stop the Sand Mine maintains that every appropriate avenue of evaluation must be undertaken for the Southworth sand mine property, including a full review of the excavation and ground-collapse incident that occurred in the same general location. FDOT continues to pursue acquisition of this property with taxpayer funds despite **numerous documented red flags in its own technical assessments**. Moving forward with the purchase under these conditions represents a misuse of public resources and exposes taxpayers to significant future liabilities.

The Test Lab borings are FDOT documents, collected for FDOT construction, to evaluate FDOT's only intended sand-use/borrow pit, as confirmed to us by project manager Anil Sharma. The sand mine site is identified under FDOT Project ID 442764-2 — the SunCoast Parkway project number commonly used for the 3A section. We were also told by Mr. Sharma that FDOT did not evaluate any alternative sand sources and that the excess sand from the prior SunCoast phase had already been sold off. If FDOT truly faces a sand shortage, why was that surplus not retained for future phases? And when did FDOT enter the sand-mining business at all? This appears far outside the agency's intended scope.

FDOT's Test Lab borings were drilled within a few hundred feet of the October 24 excavation/ground-collapse incident — directly adjacent

to the location where FDOT contractors struck groundwater and the pit filled from the bottom up. What people need to understand is this:

With a discontinuous clay layer in this area, the surficial sands and the Floridan limestone aquifer function as one connected system.

It is because of **FDOT's Test Lab borings and the conclusions in the Test Lab report**, as well as **the CES piezometer measurements and the analysis in the CES report**, that we know the clay layer in this area is discontinuous or non-confining, and that subsurface voids are present. When the excavator dug down approximately 20 feet (as documented by the Department of Health), it opened an unconfined zone, allowing the pit to fill from the bottom up. All of these documented findings confirm that the excavation intersected a groundwater system already proven to be in hydraulic continuity with the Upper Floridan Aquifer. **This was an aquifer breach — not stormwater and not a 'stormwater pond footprint' event.**

FDOT's own Test Lab borings and reports document the same unstable, karst-prone subsurface conditions beneath both the October 24 excavation/ground-collapse location and the Southworth/Crystal River borrow pit site. Once FDOT chose to incorporate the sand mine property into the SunCoast Parkway project, these findings became directly relevant to evaluating public risk. FDOT's data must now be used to answer critical questions:

- How does excavation in this area interact with the aquifer?
- What groundwater pathways lead from this location into Kings Bay and Crystal River?
- How quickly could contamination travel through this first-magnitude spring system?

This entire area is designated as an Outstanding Florida Spring (OFS) Priority Focus Area (PFA) — a classification reserved for the most vulnerable parts of the Floridan Aquifer, where groundwater and spring flow are directly connected. This is not speculation; it is the

definition provided by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

And most importantly:
FDOT's Test Lab reports and the CES piezometer data both confirm this hydrologic connection.

FDOT has directly informed us that they are in the process of purchasing the Southworth property. Because of this, FDOT can no longer claim that the site is independently owned or unrelated to their activities; in fact, FDOT's own technical data predicted exactly the kind of excavation and groundwater collapse that occurred there. FDOT has been involved with this property for an extended period, and if they intend to use it for construction materials, then the hydrogeologic reports from the sand mine area — particularly those documenting groundwater exposure, collapse, or aquifer breach — are unquestionably relevant. Taxpayer dollars will be used to acquire this site, and FDOT continues to tell the public that it is held to a "higher standard" for protecting our springs and aquifer. Every available avenue of evaluating both the property and the collapse incident must therefore be fully explored, especially given the numerous warning signs. FDOT's own Test Lab report cautioned them clearly:

> "The site is underlain by limestone bedrock that is susceptible to dissolution and the subsequent development of karst features such as voids and sinkholes in the natural soil overburden… internal soil erosion and ground subsidence could affect mine expansion. It is not possible to eliminate future sinkhole-related problems — the owner must understand and accept this risk."

> Floridians should not be forced to finance a high-risk borrow pit that endangers our springs, our aquifer, our water supply, and our community. We deserve transparency; we deserve science-based

decision-making; and we deserve to know that our state agencies are following the law — not finding ways around it.

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