

10-22-2010

## Neil A. Armingeon

Neil A. Armingeon

Katie Tofano

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/voices\\_stream](https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/voices_stream)

 Part of the [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Armingeon, Neil A. and Tofano, Katie, "Neil A. Armingeon" (2010). *Voices from the Stream: An Environmental History of the St. Johns River*. 5.

[https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/voices\\_stream/5](https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/voices_stream/5)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Voices from the Stream: An Environmental History of the St. Johns River by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© 10-22-2010 All Rights Reserved

Interviewee: Neil Armingeon, St. John's Riverkeeper

Interviewer: Katie Tofano

Location: Jacksonville University

October 22, 2010

Duration: 24:02

Tofano: Good morning, Neil.

Armingeon: Katie, how you are doing?

Tofano: I'm doing good. Okay, I wanted to talk to you a little about the 10 year anniversary of the Riverkeeper.

Armingeon: Okay.

Tofano: I know this year marks that.

Armingeon: Yes.

Tofano: I wanted to know how successful you think the Riverkeeper has been in implementing guidelines and awareness around St. John's.

Armingeon: I think we've been very successful in rallying the community around the rumor of the river's health and what we need to do to improve it. We have also had some success strengthening regulations, for example. But you know over all we have a long way to go. But I think as an organization, as a small nonprofit, we've done a really good job of kind of galvanizing the community's interest in the river.

Tofano: Great. So I know that a lot of other riverkeepers such as the Hudson have been around for quite a while. Why do you think it's taken so long for the St. Johns for Jacksonville to get a riverkeeper going?

2

Armingeon: Well, you know, you mention the Hudson. That's kind of the, I guess you could say, the wellspring of all the keepers. The first program began on the Hudson and that movement began really in the 60s and into the 70s and somehow you know in the late mid 80s is when they kind of adopted this term the riverkeeper. So all of us kind of sprang from that group of people. You ask that why did it take this long. Part of it is this movement kind of began in the northeast and west coast and I think as a region the south was probably one of the later regions that kind of focused on these issues. What I always tell people is there was a group of people about twelve years ago who knew about the Hudson Riverkeeper and the riverkeeper movement and there was a fellow, Roger Bass, who was a marine surveyor. Roger was one of those guys who goes in and values boats, tells you what boats were and helps with selling boats. [Construction noise partially garbles previous sentence. Neil pauses until it stops.] And you know he, Roger, had

known about it. He went to this gathering of I think there were about fifteen riverkeepers there and he came back and said we need a program like that for the river. And so it took about eighteen months to really form the core of the organization and then we applied for a license and we were the 56<sup>th</sup> riverkeeper program. And today there are 190 of us.

Tofano: Wow.

Armingeon: In the history of the Waterkeeper Alliance, that's what all of this is called, we're certainly one of the older groups. But I think it took a dedicated group of people to do a lot of work to start an organization like this.

Tofano: Right. And what were those groups? Did Earthjustice have some . . .

Armingeon: Well, one of them is here. We're at Jacksonville University today and at that time he was a marine scientist. Dr. Quinton White. It was a whole group of people. Quint, who was an academic and he had been studying the river for decades. We had commercial fishermen. People who were quote traditional environmentalists. There were people from Gainesville who were interested in this idea. St. Augustine. St John's County. And it took a while. There was a lot of people. There were certain issues that some people immediately wanted to form around. Some people were more cautionary. This is a pretty conservative area, and so I think this idea had to kind of take hold.

Tofano: Right. That leads me to my next kind of political question. I notice an overwhelming number of 2010 candidates running didn't answer a lot of the questions on your survey. What do you think that means for the river?

Armingeon: Well I think it means we're still not to a point where . . . in other words I guess some candidates felt that it's probably better for me to say no response as opposed to actually put their lot, name, credibility on the line to say I want to do more for the river. It's all over, but it's really in Florida. In the last eighteen months what I see in the work that I do is this whole issue of environmental regulations are going to cost us jobs. You hear it over and over and so we're not at a point yet. I think we're moving toward that. And I think this movement to this with the mayoral race in Jacksonville you will see candidates have to answer these questions. But there is still some reluctance. [Pause for noise] There still some reluctance to say okay I'm for a clean environment. I mean I know that's kind of hard to believe, but that's where we are. And so I guess I look at it and think as an organization we're ten years old and that's a long time for many small organizations like this. I always tell people we're building a movement and movements take decades. So we're still in our infancy, really.

Tofano: So I know that you were the environmental director prior to coming here on Lake Pontchartrain.

Armingeon: Yeah, in New Orleans.

Tofano: So what made St. Johns River . . . What drew you to Jacksonville?

Armingeon: Well it wasn't the river. It was a woman. I was in New Orleans working on Lake Pontchartrain and I was seeing a woman Nayan [Couldn't completely make out name or find any verification on the spelling.] who is now my wife. She lived here and I lived in New Orleans. We were burning up a lot of jet fuel. I had been in Lake Pontchartrain for about eleven years and sometimes I think in this work you kind of get to a point where maybe you've said all you can say or something. I find myself today if I show up in certain venues it's like people think okay Neil's here so we know what he's going to say. But anyway, to make a long story short, it was really kind of a whole - depending on your thinking - either divine intervention or cosmic reality. I was coming here to Jacksonville and I had a friend who had moved from Jacksonville to New Orleans to be with now his wife. He had friends here and I heard about this job and applied really. And so I didn't come to Jacksonville to be the St. John's Riverkeeper. It just worked out that way.

Tofano: Okay. Historically speaking what would you say is the . . .if you could pinpoint a specific cause of the pollution in history. I know in the 1950s was when they really realized there was a lot of pollution in the river.

Armingeon: Right. A lot of people don't realize this especially folks your age. Up until the late 70s, Jacksonville discharged raw sewage into the river. I know people who go what? I mean, I've talked to people . . .There are two major hospitals, St Vincent's and Baptist, along the river and the reason those places were put there is they used to discharge medical waste into the river. People thought that's how you got rid of stuff. You put it in a body of water and it magically disappears, and we're close to the ocean. Frankly that same mentality still prevails. I think you ask what's the biggest form of pollution or what's the biggest issue for the river and I think everyone always wants to say it's the Georgia Pacific paper mill or it's JEA. It's all of us really. And the largest single pollutant is nitrogen and phosphorus nutrients. That's why we have algae blooms. It's very linked to the fish kills. The foam. And yesterday ironically some members called us. There's a fish kill in the river right now. These small fish, kind of like sardines, that have these really bad sores. I was just talking to Dr. White. It could be this organism called pfiesteria. So the river has problems and its main cause is nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus. And that comes from, yes there's a lot of pipes. There are thirty-two discharge permits in the river, meaning a big pipe that discharges water. That totals about 130 million gallons a day in our section. That's a lot. You know, some people say, well you know compare that to the quote volume of the river it's a very small percentage. But again that's that whole dilution is the solution to pollution. That's a very narrow usually self-serving opinion.

Tofano: Right. So what do you think about the nutrient standards shifting? I know it was supposed to be . . . the EPA was supposed to . . .

Armingeon: Well they're going to do it. We're one of the groups. There are five other groups statewide and local that filed a federal lawsuit and a federal judge - I mean somehow this is kind of got lost in all this hysterical rhetoric that's been published - a federal judge had a hearing, listened to both sides, and told the State of Florida look you've been going to reduce nitrogen, phosphorus for twelve years and frankly you've had your chance and I'm telling the EPA you've got to step in and do something.

Tofano: Why do you think they've moved it back another month?

Armingeon: We as the plaintiffs agreed. There were over 22,000 comments. I'm proud to say 20,000 of those . . . The polluters say the 22,000 comments, what they failed to tell people was 20,000 of those were people saying we want you to do this. So we're being on process. We want to make sure that these processes are legal and so the extra thirty days we felt like it's a reasonable request and we went along with it. In less than a month now those regulations will be published in the federal register.

Tofano: How do you think they're going to [lost to construction noise]

Armingeon: I think that it will. The first thing people ask me is is this going to be better than what we have? Absolutely. What we have now . . . a lot of these issues are complicated. It's hard . . . One of our job's challenges is to make sure people understand what does all this mean. The way I describe it to people: The regulations we have now would be analogous to your driving. You see the black and white speed signs and instead of saying a certain number it says drive at a safe speed. Well we all know mostly that that's going to be chaotic at best and it's not enforceable. The simple thing that's going to happen is November 15 we're going to have a new merit standard. The speed limit is fifty-five miles per hour. You understand that. You do things to make sure that you're following that and if you're not it's enforceable. And there's a lot of rhetoric. but that's the bottom line. And it will take decades even with these numbers before we really begin to see restoration in some of Florida's rivers and streams.

Tofano: You were voted the Best Righteous Crusader and the Best Local Environmental Activist by *Folio Weekly*, so that right there is a good argument that you are doing a lot for the river and you are the river's greatest ally.

Armingeon: First I appreciate that those are voted by the public and I'm the kind of the face of the Riverkeeper. But I view those awards, we all, the organization won those. I think one of the things I think we have that we built here is trust. People believe. I mean, our agenda is what's best for the river is best for the community. And so that drives us and I think when people hear from us they may not agree with us, but people I think understand our dog in this fight is what's best for the river. I would kind of laugh when I see those . . . What was ironic about the *Folio*, I

think it came out on a Tuesday or a Wednesday/ Anyway I think I saw it on a Wednesday. That morning I was at a meeting talking about the nutrient standards and a representative of the largest discharger - I shouldn't say the largest polluter although they are - of the river is our local utility Jacksonville Electric Authority JEA. So it was kind of this point counterpoint discussion in front of this public body and I had my say and the JEA representative stood up and said, "Only Neil can make such a crude misstatement" and I came outside and someone said I don't know if he saw the *Folio* and I said fame is a fleeting thing. There are people there that don't care about . . .they view us as their enemy. And that's I think one of the most difficult things about my job is people don't like us. There are people who would love to see us pack up and go away.

Tofano: And just let the river just . . .

Armingeon: Right. There's a whole group of people that claim what we're doing is working we don't need to do anything more.

Tofano: And that's JEA . . .

Armingeon: Well just dischargers. Business. There are probably millions of dollars that have been spent trying to turn the public against these nutrient standards. If you go on I think there was a website Don't Tax Florida. I think now they've changed themselves to Citizens for Progressive blah blah something. But if you look at that, they claim they represent business and I understand that. But I think the thing that people need to understand when people discharge to a body of water. First we the public own that body of water. Okay. Second, when they are discharging pollutant they're externalizing and I don't want into get too much into economic terms because I'm not an economist, but they're externalizing those costs. They can spend more money to reduce pollution, but that would eat into their profits. But what they would rather do is keep their profits and destroy what belongs to all of us. And that concept I've been dealing with that. I've been an environmentalist - luckily worked as an environmentalist for twenty-one years and that issue I worked in North Carolina and Louisiana and now here and it's always prevalent. Polluters externalize the cost of business on us, the public. They wrap themselves into we're jobs, we're good for the economy. Well yeah, but they're also destroying what belongs to all of us.

Tofano: Right. So what do you think of Amendment 4? Do you think Amendment 4 is going to have any impact on the river and building around the river?

Armingeon: I think it could. You know as an organization, we haven't taken a position. As an individual I support Amendment 4. I realize democracy is messy. One of the things that we try to do here is involve people in these decisions and frankly it can get messy. Anybody that just saw Jacksonville just had their budget and I think the public meeting was something like four or five hours. I think these are decisions the public must be involved with. What I tell people somewhere today

in our watershed, which is big, thirteen counties, there's somebody probably sitting in a room like this making a decision that will have an impact on the health and/or future of either the river or some spring or something. There's a decision being made and one of our goals is to have somebody there, be it a resident a citizen, myself, somebody saying how is this going to impact the health of the river?

Tofano: So where do you see the organization in another ten years, on your 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

Armingeon: Well a strong part . . . our influence maybe expanded. We've really have made some progress. People south of here know what St. Johns Riverkeeper is. We're respected or disliked or however you want to describe it from one end of the river to the other. Our long term goal: We have people not only here in Jacksonville but maybe somebody in Sanford working with that. To really work with a community you have to be part of it. I tell people sometimes I ride into some place at night, have my say, and then go home. And that's that has some merit but it's frankly not the best way to work and ask people. People need somebody locally they can identify with.

Tofano: And how about the river in another ten years?

Armingeon: I'm optimistic. I am. We are making progress. I think this nutrient standard is going to be a lot of, pardon me, pissing and moaning. But eventually we will get to a point where people realize okay, we can live with this. It's going to cost us some money, nobody knows how much, but when we begin to see the health of our waterways improve. Yeah. I think most people if I said to the average person would you pay \$5 a month to improve the health of the river, I think almost 100% of the people would say that. Where I think we fail is we have things like storm water fees. It will help the river but people . . . we can't link it. In other words, people here are paying \$5 a month for their storm water fees. Well they view that as a tax. They don't view it as a way for them and individual households to help the river. We need to do better on convincing people that nothing's free. We're pretty honest with people. We tell them, we can continue where we're going and have on the front page of the metro section a picture of some really bad fish with sores all over them or we can have a healthy river.

Tofano: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Armingeon: The only thing I would tell people who are listening to this as an individual we all are responsible for the health problems of the river, but at the same time we're the real basis of cleaning up the river. If each of us does something today that reduces our impact - we use less water, we use less fertilizer, we plant native plants, we vote for people who care about the river - then that's a power. There's almost 3.7 million, so one small thing multiplied by that number is very powerful.

Tofano: Definitely. Well thank you.

Armingeon: You're welcome.

Tofano: Thank you so much for everything you do for the river. We appreciate it.

Armingeon: You're welcome. I'm pretty lucky I've got probably the best job in Jacksonville.

## **Part 2**

Interviewee: Neil Armingeon

Interviewers: Katie Tofano

Location: Offices of the St. Johns Riverkeeper, Jacksonville University, Jacksonville, Florida

Date: November 18, 2010

Duration: 30:38

[Picks up in the middle of a conversation]

Armingeon: . . . but they'll be all . . . every walk of life. That's the really cool thing I like about the oyster roast. And frankly it's the biggest celebration of the river.

Tofano: Yeah.

Armingeon: There will be over five hundred people. And it's really kind of the only time . . .

Tofano: And obviously it's everybody coming together for the river and . . .

Armingeon: And yeah. As I always say, if you probably had, you know . . . there's a wide variety of people. And there's probably two or three things that most people in that room would agree on, if that many.

Tofano: Really?

Armingeon: But one would be they love the river.

Tofano: Right.

Armingeon: And that's the power of the river. I have a picture of myself, Anders Crenshaw and Corrine Brown. And I tell people there's the power . . . because, you know, no offense to Corrine or Anders, they're very . . . politically they don't agree on much.



Tofano: Yeah.

Armingeon: If anything and so that just kind of shows, you know, the power of the river, really. To bring people together. We're non-partisan. We, you know, are critical of both parties when need be.

Tofano: Yeah, definitely.

Armingeon: So, anyway, I'm looking forward to it.

Tofano: So what will you be doing at the oyster roast?

Armingeon: I mainly walk around.

Tofano: [Laughs] Everybody wants to talk to you.

Armingeon: I talk to a lot of people. Usually at the end of the night, I was telling somebody yesterday, usually I go home, you know, there's stuff to do so I don't get home til twelve or one o'clock and I just kind of sit there and go whoa. It happens so quickly. It's like that three hours or three-and-a-half hours goes [snaps fingers] like that. And yeah, I talk to a lot of people.

Tofano: Do you get time to enjoy any oysters?

Armingeon: Last year, I did not, actually. Last year I think I had like three oysters and no food. It's just, it was like a blur. So I'm gonna try to do better this year. You know, I just kind of start off and, you know, as I try to walk and play a lot of people want to see what's going on. I see a lot of people I want to thank, so it's not . . . it's fun, it's just kind of a blur.

Tofano: Right, yeah.

Armingeon: I mean, sometimes I see people and I say I saw you but I didn't get a chance to talk to you, or I talked to you and I don't even remember it. It's just one of those things.

Tofano: That's funny. So are a lot of the people who go volunteers? Volunteers? Politicians?

Armingeon: Well, there's gonna be a lot of elected officials, cause, you know, especially in Jacksonville, they're all running. They all want to be seen there. It's, you know, we could not do it without volunteers. Obviously, Jennie Busey and Lori Shad are the co-chairs. They do an incredible amount of work. Barbara Jackson's the one I told you about. She does an unbelievable job with the silent auction. And then we have, Kelly has a bunch of volunteers who do everything from help check people

in, make sure people know where to park, that whole part is not something, Kelly and a lot of other people do that. I really, especially this year, I've not had much time to deal with it. And this Monday was the release of the EPA nutrient stance.

Tofano: I saw that. And what do you think about that?

Armingeon: Well, we're happy that they were established. I mean, it's kind of mixed bag. First and foremost, we're not totally pleased. I don't know if you read there was a fifteen month extension, which seems a bit much. But I think the EPA felt like that would do a long way to kind of diffusing this . . . a lot of people were told, you know, on Tuesday everything's gonna change. It was politically driven, I'm sure. It kinda makes sense. It will allow people a chance to understand. Not everybody . . . I think one of the misconceptions . . . there's a lot of parties and I'm not overjoyed to say this, is not gonna have any impact on. It's gonna have an impact in this community, because, for one thing, JEA is one of the largest utilities and they discharge to a surface-water body and we have very archaic treatment. So yeah, it's gonna be some changes here. So, you know, in general. I think the other thing the EPA did a good job. They kind of dealt with this whole what I would say hysterical rhetoric that the polluters and special interest are generating about how much this is gonna cost. I'll give you an example. The sewage lobby computed that it would take fifty billion dollars. Those are the people, you know, the waste water. I call 'em the sewage lobby. That was their number. Fifty BILLION dollars. And this was a study that was done by an engineering firm, and then about a week ago, I don't know if you saw this, there's something called the *Florida Independent*. It's an internet-based news service. They found an internal Department of Environmental Protection memo which just blew the doors off that number. Said it was a total overestimate. They did not computer it correctly. They had bad math. That really set the stage to show people, look this math is crazy. Here's the bottom line: The EPA . . . the polluters estimated fifty billion. The EPA looked at each wastewater treatment plant that this would impact, okay. Looked at the plant, the receiving body of water, what technology it would take to meet these standards, and the number they computer was eighty-five million. Now I'm suggesting that eight-five million is not a lot of money, but it's six hundred times less what the polluters were telling people. So here's what it boils down to for individuals. So what is eighty-five million? They figured out somewhere between eleven cents and twenty-five cents a day per household. And that what works out is about five dollars a month, sixty dollars a year.

Tofano: I'd be willing to do that.

Armingeon: Right. What I tell people so think about your daily life, you know. That's two lattes at Starbucks, less than a six-pack of Budweiser, and a lot less than most fishing lures. It's less than two gallons of gas. I think most people, if they knew that water, I mean, that five bucks from their household is gonna improve water quality, I don't think most people are gonna say hell no. I think most people are

gonna say yes. So I think the EPA did a good job with that.

Tofano: People can understand it like that, though.

Armingeon: Right and that's part . . . again, I don't want to be hard about the fifteen month extension. It's because it gives us time to sit down with people and rationally explain okay this is what this means for you. There's gonna be lawsuits. I mean, we know that. There's probably gonna be, our attorney said there could be as many as a hundred. But, I think we talked about the first time, what is Florida without clean water? Nothing. So if we as a state can't realize that, I think we've got much greater problems than the EPA telling us what to do.

Tofano: Yeah. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised by the quickness that the new governor . . . like that, he just . . .

Armingeon: Yeah. And I think what was misleading about what the governor-elect did, the fifteen months, he took credit for something that really wasn't his doing. And so, to me, I don't know. To me, I'm not impressed that he fires off some press release saying thanks to me. No, thanks to the Department of Environmental Protection, the EPA, and people, rational people, there was an extension. It had nothing, Rick Scott isn't even the governor. Let's not give this guy, he's not king yet. In his own mind, I guess he is. But we, you know . . . something bad happened. The legislature, they overturned a bunch of vetoes of Governor Christ and there was some house bills that the governor, Governor Christ vetoed that we thought was the proper thing to do. This new legislature overturned all that, so it's gonna be rough sledding. I mean, I think that right now the people who took office are feeling their oats. I think it's gonna take some months for people to really understand what's at stake here. A lot. And so, we know, we're gonna . . . it was somewhat discouraging what happened with the election in the context, not so much who won or didn't win, it's just the environment wasn't really part of the discussion. And I think there are some people who took that as the blanket statement that people don't care about the environment, and I don't believe that.

Tofano: You don't believe that . . .

Armingeon: I think most people when you talk to them do care about the environment. It's just, you know, sadly wasn't part of any, very few races brought up the environment. And we tried. We had a forum for candidates and we're gonna do the same thing for Jacksonville. And hopefully we'll continue on. People have to realize, you know, things can really go south based on what the politics in Florida are right now.

Tofano: Definitely. I mean the fifteen month waiting period couldn't . . . I mean . . . as far as loopholes go. . .

Armingeon: Oh yeah, I think I've said this from the beginning. We're a long way from seeing

these . . . The regulations have been established. They will be published within sixty days in the federal register. And then we have fifteen more months. You know, the congressional delegation is working with the polluters to try to kill this. You know, again, in some ways what's happening here people are misreading the public. But they're gonna do everything they can to maintain the status quo and that's always been. Those who are degrading or destroying natural resources and then passing the cost on to us are always those in power and they're gonna use their power to keep externalizing pollution costs on anybody but themselves. And we as taxpayers, we're bearing the burden of this.

Tofano: That's kind of depressing.

Armingeon: Well, it can be, but . . .

Tofano: How do you handle . . . I mean, do you get home and just kind of like . . .

Armingeon: Oh yeah. The day after the election, I was really pretty . . . I was in a funk.

Tofano: Yeah.

Armingeon: You know, because immediately there were discussions about what this election meant. And I think it meant a lot of people wanted to see things different, but I think in no way that people don't give a damn about the environment. In this past week, we have been . . . we, the organizations that brought this suit, we've been called left-wing radicals, people out of touch, claiming that the election . . . if you look at what happened in the election, people don't want these regulations. I mean, what I think people need to understand is, these polluters are spending millions of dollars to misinform the public, scare the public. I mean there whole program is based on fear. You never hear any of these people say the thing that they can't deny, we have water quality problems. We had a press conference in Tallahassee with photos of water bodies throughout the state. And many of the press . . . in Tallahassee, it's kinda the middle of the state. You don't really see one coast or the other, so we had a whole series of photos of the river, of the Caloosahatchee River, of some springs, and people were literally, some of the tv crews were filming it were what is this?

Tofano: They had no idea?

Armingeon: They had no idea that the photos of the river, which were recent photos, people were just aghast. Like you are kidding me!

Tofano: These are reporters.

Armingeon: So you know, those photos . . . photos don't lie. We've been accused of Photoshopping. This is the reality of it. And so, I think, once people . . . the good thing right now in northeast Florida no one given what we went through this

summer has to be convinced that we need to do more for the river. No one. Except maybe some people who were discharging or industries who don't want to do any more. But I don't think anybody with any rational understanding of what's going on around us would argue that what we're doing is not leading to a healthy river.

Tofano: Would you consider the St. Johns River a tragedy of the commons?

Armingeon: Yeah. Very much so. Because it belongs to all of us. You know, it's through all of our inaction or maybe not what we need to do, the river's health is really at a breaking point. We've had fish kills now. We had another fish kill, I think, since you and I spoke. Which they determined was based on a fungus, but still it has nothing to do with nitrogen.

Tofano: Those were the sardine ones with the sores?

Armingeon: The minnows and the pokies, yeah. The press release said it was a fungus, but still I talked to some fisheries people. Generally one of the reasons that fungus is able to kind of impact the fisheries is because, in general, the wildlife is stressed for other reasons. We've had, you know, just a bad summer. I was talking to somebody yesterday. We were still getting pictures of foam November 4<sup>th</sup>. And so, you know, this has been a bad summer. But we're hopeful, really, that things are gonna . . . we're not giving up. That's the main thing. More than ever people need something to believe in, so we're just gonna keep pushing on, educating people about these new regulations. Like I said, I kind of look at it pragmatically. We have some time to educate people who may be on the fence, or maybe read some of this and think, good grief I . . . I mean, there were all kinds of things . . . Your sewer bill is gonna go up a hundred dollars a year, seventy dollars a month. I mean, with the economy, that's a lot of, that's a lot of money anytime. So one of the things we've got to do is kinda break it down like I was telling you. I'm fairly confident, I'm confident in the wastewater treatment part of this. That the EPA is accurate and again, I'm not trying to minimize, but I think most people are willing to pay five dollars a family to have a better life for the environment.

Tofano: I had no idea how sick the St. Johns River was until I took this class. I'm not from here so I didn't really know the river that well. But I was just floored.

Armingeon: Yeah. And the one thing that I think is important . . . I don't want to feel hopeless. As I tell people, if we were to take a bus tour of the east coast. This is a sad story, but probably every major river system on the east coast of this country are suffering from nutrient pollution, lack of fresh water, wetland loss, storm water runoff. We, as a country, have allowed all this. I don't want people to think, oh the river is just beyond repair. It's not. What was ironic this year, I think, was one of the best shrimp runs in most people's memory. And I had a lot of people say well how can that be? How can we have all these problems in the early part of the summer and still have this bumper shrimp crop? Part of it is shrimp biology runs like that. Some years it's a bounty, some year's it's not. But the river's a powerful

force and nature is powerful and what I told people, let's enjoy the good parts of the river, let's work to improve the damaged parts, and be happy that we have what we have.

Tofano: So how much time would you say you spend on the river patrolling?

Armingeon: Very little right now. It's hard to be on the river when you've got to be in Tallahassee at nine o'clock. We've got a lot going on. We've not only got this nutrient thing, we're working very hard on this whole pipeline . . . Georgia-Pacific pipeline. We're working on something called a compliance report. We're looking at permits and seeing who's violating the permits. Just generally, you know . . . Sadly, I always say this, the decisions that impact the health of the river are never made on the river. I always say we should get a boat, put everybody on the boat, get out on the river, and then say, ok now, let's talk about this. So lately, moreso this summer because of what was going on in the early summer, but this fall very little.

Tofano: Not as much as you'd like to be.

Armingeon: No. I should be out there at least once a week, but I'm just not. I don't . . . it's probably not going to happen this year.

Tofano: When you catch people, when you're actually out there on the river, and you see someone polluting . . .

Armingeon: Yeah.

Tofano: What do you say? I mean . . . what do . . . do they get fined? Or do you just kinda . . .

Armingeon: Sometimes we document it. I'm more apt to catch somebody . . . like two weeks ago I was gonna speak to . . . there's a club at Bolles called the River Dogs. Some high school students have started a river club. Ironically, I was headed to speak to them and I was going down San Jose and there was two crews of people, landscape people, blowing stuff into the storm drain. I mean they were piling it up in front of the storm drain and then just blowing it. So I stopped, backed up, and thought what the hell are you guys doing? What do you know? Who are you? I'm like I'm the St. Johns Riverkeeper and what you're doing is wrong and I'm gonna call the city and I'm asking you to stop. Normally . . . I just got a call about a broken sewer line last week in Riverside. So the first thing we try to do is call whoever is the regulator, encourage the citizens who called us to follow up. That means somebody other than us, with us. And then try to keep track of it. There's so many events. Ironically, the sewer spill in Riverside I've been dealing with on and off for a couple of years. There's a bad, a really bad odor in this very nice neighborhood. And finally after a lot of complaining and generally staying on people, what they realized is there was a broken sewer line. So there was raw

sewage going into the storm drain, going right into the river. And you think, good Lord, why would that take two years to fix? Because there's more . . . the best way to do it is stay on somebody's ass, really. Pardon my French. But . . . we can only do so much. That's why we try to educate people how they can. Like when people call, a lot of the times Deb will help them report.

Tofano: Right.

Armingeon: Because I think once people . . . there's a certain reluctance, but once people do it, they want to see what happened. And it's good for us, because people realize, you know, enforcement's weak. A lot of people all this is heavily regulated. That thing about the polluters. They're always complaining about regulations. Hell, enforcement in this state is terrible! It's terrible! They don't even regulate what we have now. So this idea that somehow people are being over regulated is laughable. It's just, again, another one of the great lies that polluters like to tell. They're great at it. It's always they're so concerned about this and that. Well they're concerned about one thing – their bottom line. Profits. And then, like I said, what makes their profits grow is we, the public, clean up their messes. And that's how it is.

Tofano: I'm actually embarrassed to say I have a friend in Tallahassee who wanted . . . their septic tank system broke and they were having problems with it and problems with it and they couldn't afford . . . they fixed it once, it broke again. They couldn't afford to fix it again so he just . . .

Armingeon: Ran a straight pipe.

Tofano: Ran a straight pipe into the ditch by the house and just let all the waste go into the . . . And I said, do you realize that that's gonna . . .

Armingeon: A, it's illegal. B, it's a horrible health risk. And C, there are programs that can help people with those kind of issues. You know, I tell people this, if you can't afford to have your septic tank, there are programs that can help people repair them, have them pumped, it's not just all or nothing. But you've got to have the desire to do something. Because, frankly, you know, if you're caught doing that, then you're in real trouble.

Tofano: I was appalled when I heard that he did that . . .

Armingeon: [Simultaneous talking] You've got to understand it keeps the waste out of his house. But it goes into the environment and frankly, like I said, it's a health risk around his family.

Tofano: His whole neighborhood.

Armingeon: Yeah, that's the thing. I mean, pollution doesn't stop at . . . okay . . . Georgia-

Pacific, your pollution ends right here. No, it goes. So part of it, I don't want to say all the problems are based on all polluters. We're all polluters, everyday we produce waste, it's treated. If we don't demand good treatment, then it's pollution. If we're unwilling to have our septic tank pumped or repaired, we're polluting. And let's be honest, we use too much water, we're risking the health of the river. You know, that's still one of the most . . . that's a difficult . . . I don't think most people grasp that. The most common question, or one of the most common questions I'm asked, who's the biggest polluter? It's human nature. And everybody wants me to say it's JEA or Georgia-Pacific. And then they can think, okay. I spoke to a group up in Amelia Island. This guy said, it sounds like to me that you're trying to say all this . . . we're doing all this. And like, well we are, really. We are responsible, if we buy whatever the brands Georgia-Pacific produces then the back end which we don't see, we don't see it at Publix, they use chlorine to bleach the paper towels. That's the dioxin that goes into the environment. So, you know, you can't escape, so we drive the market by buying that. If we bought recycled paper towels, they're not as fluffy and they're not as thick. But the cost, whatever the cost is is the cost. We're not paying the full cost of northern paper towels, okay. We're not. Because somewhere down the road those external costs are put on the environment, and, you know, we're paying for it.

Tofano: Just little things that everyone can do.

Armingeon: Right. Absolutely. If we all did one thing it would help. That's why I try to . . . I think we all here at Riverkeeper, what we try to do, is not make this seem more unsurmountable. Like if you make sure your sprinkler heads are watering, you follow the regulations, and you don't over fertilize. Then you're doing a lot. You're reducing your impact. And if each of us took that responsibility seriously, we would make . . . there's about three-and-a-half, three point seven million of us.

Tofano: Make a big difference.

Armingeon: Make a huge difference. And so, you know, part of what we do is break it down. Like I said, people are like good Lord we're doomed. Let's just go home and forget it.

Tofano: It is a depressed . . . it is depressing, but I think your organization has done a good job of being optimistic . . . bringing an optimistic . . .

Armingeon: Part of what we sell is hope. And, you know, if we don't have hope we have nothing. So, you know, keep plugging. It's discouraging when you know something's right. I've been at this a long time. I've been called a lot of names. That part doesn't bother me. It's discouraging sometimes. You think, good grief, have we not advanced that far. But, you know, there's a whole bunch of news clips that most of the major papers in the state support the EPA's regulations and make a valid case why we have to do this. And so you've just gotta hope that



people read that and go okay, now I get this. Fear is . . . people for all issues are using fear to manipulate people. The environment is no different. People are on fixed incomes. God, I can't pay seven hundred . . . I love the river, but how can I spend seven hundred dollars a year? And it's not gonna be that.

Tofano: Well, I guess my one last question, this is just for my personal interest and it's kind of a silly question. But I just wanted to know what your favorite band is.

[Hems and haws a bit]

Tofano: You can pick a few.

Armingeon: I, there's a lot of bands from New Orleans I like.

Tofano: So you like blues, jazz?

Armingeon: I like, I listen to a wide variety. I like, for example, I like Drive by Truckers, because they're an Alabama band. I like Elvis Costello, because every one of his albums is different. I like there's a pianist or a piano player from New Orleans, Allen Toussaint, I don't know if you've ever heard of him.

Tofano: No.

Armingeon: He's really great.

Tofano: I'll check him out then.

Armingeon: And, what I'm listening to a lot lately is I know, well you might know who Leon Russell, way before your time. But he was a pretty famous guy back in the early seventies. And he kinda fell out of favor and he did a new album with Elton John, which was pretty amazing. Cause I'm not a big Elton John fan, but it's like these two older guys getting together with some really good music.

Tofano: Cool. All right. Well this is Katie Tofano interviewing Neil Armingeon, the Riverkeeper, at Jacksonville University on November 18<sup>th</sup> at about 12:30. Thank-you, Neil. It was nice talking to you again.

Armingeon: You're welcome, Katie. Again, thanks. I appreciate it.