

# Apopka mayor halts research

Divers did sink-to-spring dye tests until John Land heard of it.

By **MELISSA HARRIS**

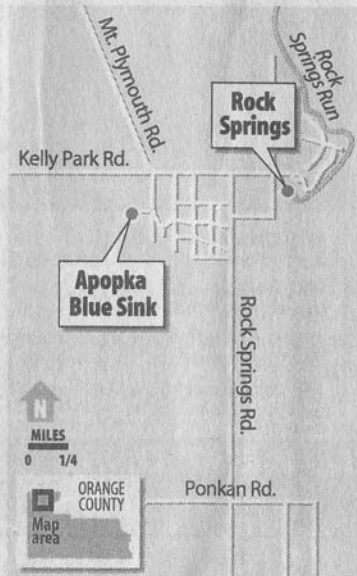
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Apopka Mayor John Land, angered by criticism of his growth-management practices, is trying to make it more difficult for environmentalists to continue research in a sink-hole that serves as a window into Florida's system of underground rivers.

Land said Thursday he did not know that scientists had been conducting dives to determine whether water flows from the Apopka Blue Sink into Rock Springs until he read about the experiments earlier this week in an *Orlando Sentinel* story.

Included in the article were comments from a local Sierra Club leader who criticized what he called Apopka's apparent "manifest destiny" to develop northwest Orange County. Land said he not only didn't appreciate the remark but also was concerned that the scientists had not followed proper procedures.

"These scientists haven't come in here and talked to me,"



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# Research team is angered by ban

**SINK** FROM B1

Land said. "I'd just as soon not have the sink publicized. We'll just have more and more curious people wanting to go out there."

Terrence Tysall of the Cambrian Foundation, a marine research group, said city staffers told him Wednesday that his divers were banned indefinitely from the sinkhole.

Land said Thursday that he wants the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Apopka's legal and fire departments to sign off on all future experiments.

He's also asking Cambrian Foundation and Equinox Documentaries, which is filming the dives, to submit proof of insurance and to sign waivers absolving the city of liability every time their divers enter the water.

"He's clearly making us jump through a lot of hoops," said Bill Belleville of Equinox, who won an Emmy award with his film partner, Bob Giguere, for his last documentary, *Wekiva: Legacy or Loss?*

"We already had verbal permission from lower-level Apopka officials, who accompanied us onto the property for the dives and unlocked the gate," Belleville said.

Scientists want further access to the water-filled hole to determine whether water from it flows into the popular Rock Springs recreation area, where



GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

**Ready to go.** An assistant hands Terrance Tysall a jug of dye the divers are putting in Apopka Blue Sink, a sinkhole in the woods near Rock Springs. If the dye goes through to Rock Springs, it could bolster environmentalists' arguments about development of the area.

tubers float on crystal-clear water.

Scientists dove into the sink last week with jugs of dye, which they emptied into the adjoining aquifer, a system of underground rivers.

Tiny dye traps were positioned at the mouth of Rock Springs and at Sulphur Springs — thought to be the midway point in the path from Apopka Blue Sink.

Traps removed three hours after the dye's release contained no traces of the dye. Belleville is waiting on results from traps that sat in the water for 24

hours.

A connection would bolster environmentalists' arguments that the land between the sink and the springs should be filled only with two-lane country roads, farmhouses and dense forest — not expressways or subdivisions.

Further tests could show the water doesn't make it all the way to Rock Springs, Belleville said. "It's like blood flowing through veins in your body. It's a really complex system."

Given that there are no underground maps of the water system in the area, Belleville

and Tysall said they were outraged that Land would consider limiting their access for experiments they had planned to conduct in July.

"I'd be real surprised if we're allowed back in," said Tysall, whose nonprofit foundation helped Apopka clean up debris and pollution in the sink twice, once this year and once in 2002.

Land continued to question everything from the validity of the experiment to the filmmakers' and divers' credentials, ignoring what he called their "crying."

"We bought the land to pro-

tect the sinkhole, so if all of these people want access, we need a better system for approving that," Land said.

Belleville said he understands Land's sensitivity to criticism but hopes the mayor will continue to focus on the good that could come from the experiments.

"If you shut down this site because of political ego, that's really selfish and short-term," Belleville said.

Melissa Harris can be reached at [mharris@orlandosentinel.com](mailto:mharris@orlandosentinel.com) or 407-420-6269.