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## Focus on Critical Projects to Achieve Results for Indian River Lagoon

I was fortunate to realize at a young age that growing up in Martin County was a special experience. Much of that feeling came from my enjoyment of the outdoors – woods and water, fishing and camping. Add in countless friends and family who hold the same values for a beautiful environment plus great schools and safe neighborhoods, and you quickly develop a strong sense of what our community is all about.

And so it was with a deep sense of commitment that I accepted an appointment from the Governor to serve on the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District. The nine Board members set policy for the agency and provide critical direction on the use of taxpayer dollars. It's a weighty responsibility as well as a wonderful privilege – especially to represent an area like the Treasure Coast where residents are so passionate about Florida's environment.

I'm passionate, too, and my vote against the U.S. Sugar land acquisition last month was based on my fervent desire for restoration of the Everglades and the St. Lucie Estuary. The acquisition terms – in addition to a \$500 million estimated price tag – simply did not show a realistic path to restoration progress. Conditions in the contract required 20-year "leasebacks," limiting District access to meaningful land for more than 15 years, including loopholes that could push it out to 30 years. The acquisition option, while seeming to help achieve restoration goals, would actually have impeded it.

Make no mistake that I did my homework. Over many months, I listened to advocates describing the U.S. Sugar land's potential value in protecting our estuary. I talked to engineers about project ideas for the land. I asked scientists about its possible benefits for solving the blue-green algae outbreaks. I quizzed lawyers about the terms and restrictions in the option agreement. I pressed financial managers to understand funding options. And I called elected leaders in Tallahassee to explore state resources for a reservoir on the site that could cost up to \$3 billion dollars to achieve.

Three billion dollars! For just one reservoir that does not address the majority of the estuary's problems. And construction could not start for at least 15 years. The belief held by the Stuart News editorial board and dozens of advocates that a \$3 billion project would not constrain our financial resources – while putting so many other projects on hold – is simply not reality. My commitment is *completion* of projects that will help our estuary. I want to see results.

If funds were depleted for that one land buy, here's a sampling of the critical projects that would go lagging: The C-44 reservoir and stormwater treatment area, now under construction. The C-23/C-24 projects in St. Lucie County to help protect the Indian River Lagoon. The C-43 reservoir desperately needed on the Caloosahatchee River to protect its estuary at Fort Myers and around Sanibel Island. And the Kissimmee River restoration work, successfully restoring its floodplain and the hundreds of species that are again starting to thrive there. And projects to improve water quality to Everglades and Biscayne national parks. Not to mention water supply projects that will protect coastal well fields (and our drinking water) from rising seas. And the annual maintenance work and upgrades to a \$13 billion flood control system that protects our homes and businesses every time it rains.

It's an easy "soundbite" to the media that restoration is failing, but it's absolutely inaccurate. Here's a sampling of facts:

- In 2014, more clean water was moved south through the existing system than at any point in history.
- More construction dollars are now focused on bringing urgent projects on line – most of them south of the lake – than *at any other point in time* of Everglades restoration.
- Not a single county in the entire state of Florida has more restoration construction activity than we have here in Martin County. Not one.
- At no other point in time have we had construction of so many important projects poised for completion – projects that were promised for years but not delivered.

Sustaining this remarkable progress – or letting it come to an unacceptable halt – was the choice facing our Board. My personal responsibility was clear: Pass on the U.S. Sugar option and keep my eye on the ball of all the work that is poised to deliver more timely benefits. I voted to put our money where real results can be achieved. That's the future I want for my children and for Martin County and for all of South Florida.

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