



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

OPINION

November 13, 2015

Answering the Alarm Bells in Florida Bay

It's no longer a question whether two years of localized drought might mean trouble for Florida Bay. It clearly does, because this vast, shallow area between the mainland and Florida Keys is now in distress. The bay's waters have become much saltier than they should be, and seagrasses are dead or dying. Algae blooms are starting to appear, painful reminders of a sick bay back in the 1980s.

As a recently appointed Governing Board member of the South Florida Water Management District – and as part of a family that has been farming in Miami-Dade County since 1948 – I ask a lot of questions about water. One of them is, “Why do Everglades National Park and Florida Bay have too little fresh water, but there is way too much water on my nearby farm?”

It doesn't make sense.

Experts agree that scant rainfall over two years is central to the current conditions, and no one can change that. But water managers, federal officials and environmental groups each have played a part in affecting the bay's long-term health and its resiliency to drought. Consider this:

- When Everglades restoration was initiated in the early 1990s, one of its primary goals was increased water flow into Everglades National Park. Florida Bay, at nearly 1,000 square miles, is part of the park. Regrettably, the projects to deliver more water are not yet constructed, although project components, scientific analyses and engineering designs are in place.
- Moving more water through the existing system is an especially complex challenge. It is restricted by federal operational plans, bird species protection, groundwater seepage, flood control requirements, landscape features, conveyance limitations and other significant factors, which – as always – require adequate rainfall so there's enough extra water to move.

I want to be part of solving this challenge, and I do believe there are short-term steps to take, even as we work on implementing the projects that will provide longer-term improvement.

At the SFWMD Governing Board's direction, a South Dade Investigation effort has been convened to explore innovative ways to move water south to Florida Bay. Participants include water managers, federal agencies, environmental advocates and farmers in the region, which includes me and my family business.

We all recognize the competing needs for water management decisions in South Dade. Farmers need water to support the fruit and vegetable production that is an important source for America's domestic food supply (yet too much water destroys huge fields of crops). Like our urban neighbors to the east, we all expect and need flood protection and adequate water supplies in our communities. At the same time, federal park managers have a responsibility to preserve existing flora and fauna, even as some environmentalists advocate for single-species protection above all other needs.

As a fundamental goal, it makes sense to move water away from areas where there is too much and into areas, like Florida Bay and Everglades National Park, where there is not enough. It's especially frustrating that growers' fields are too wet now – even after this summer's near-drought conditions – yet only a few miles to the west, the natural systems of Everglades National Park and Florida Bay are suffering for lack of fresh water.

The South Dade Investigation is tasked with identifying the projects and operational changes that will provide relief. As a Governing Board member, agricultural stakeholder and one who shares public concern for responsible water management, I am committed to finding and implementing solutions to this critical problem.

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