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The Everglades - what does the future hold?

07/11/2009

Eco Factory Online

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Eco Factory - The Social Network for World Changers

For more than 100 years land developers, farmers and politicians at local, state and federal level did everything they could to transform the Everglades from "wasteland" to productive land.

As far as they were concerned, the Everglades - the vast River of Grass - served no purpose and so it was best to drain the land to sustain agriculture and an exploding population. Levees, canals and pumping stations were built to divert water from the rivers feeding the wetlands and very successful they were too. More than 700,000 acres of land were reclaimed for agriculture - mostly sugar cane - and tens of thousands more acres were used for housing.

It wasn't until the 1970's that the full impact of what had happened struck home. Half of the wetlands had been lost and the water supply for six million people had been compromised. The wildlife, which includes 50 endangered and threatened species, has been disrupted and 94 percent of the nesting wading birds in the Everglades have gone.

There was a very real threat that the Everglades - the only wetland of its kind in the world - could disappear completely.

Politics v Conservation

Of course, the environmentalists who first sounded the alarm were dismissed as cranks and it took more than a decade before federal and state agencies acknowledged that something had to be done. It then took another ten years to agree a solution.

In the early 1990s, the federal government passed the Everglades Forever Act designed to clean up the water flowing from Lake Okeechobee into the Everglades and in 2000, Congress approved the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), the nation's largest environmental restoration effort. It will cost at least \$10.9 billion and will take more than three decades to accomplish the 68 planned projects. It covers 16 counties and an 18,000 square mile area and involves 1,000 miles of canals and 720 miles of levees, complex planning, state-of-the-art science and engineering and many, many diverse interests. It combines restoration, water supply and water management and flood protection - all of which are not always mutually compatible.

However, in the five years after the plan was approved not a single CERP project was built. The tempo has now picked up a little. A series of marshes has been built to filter polluted water flowing from Lake Okeechobee. More treatment marshes are needed as well as huge reservoirs to hold the water. They are needed to stop the water flowing to east and west coast estuaries so that it can be funneled south into the Everglades. Many of these projects are still under construction or have not even been started.

Friends of the Everglades estimates that two acres of Everglades continues to be lost every day because the system is still so unbalanced.

Getting anything done has become a tedious process of public meetings and consultations and, of course, behind the scene lobbying from powerful vested interest groups. Congress recognized that this would lead to problems so ordered biennial reviews of the progress being made. The third independent review has just begun but it will not report to Congress until December 2010.

"The Florida Everglades is a place known throughout the world for its abundant wildlife, and it is also essential to the water supply of the people of Florida," Governor Crist said. "I have made Everglades restoration and the conservation of Florida's natural resources a high priority so that future generations can experience the Florida we love."

Because nothing like this has even been attempted work has to proceed cautiously. Scientists and engineers don't really know what the impact will be of restoring water to parts of the Everglades that were drained decades ago. That is why many projects go through a testing phase that can last up to five years as the results are evaluated. There are also concerns that if you divert water back into the Everglades it could lead to flooding in the heavily populated areas of Greater Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Big Sugar

Huge sugar cane estates surrounding the Everglades have polluted waterways for many years from fertilizer runoff. However, after lobbying in Tallahassee the industry got a water cleanup deadline extended until 2013.

In June last year, Governor Charlie Crist announced that the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) would acquire up to 187,000 acres of land owned by the United States Sugar Corporation for \$1.34 billion. Acquiring the enormous expanse of real estate offered water managers the opportunity and flexibility to store and clean water on a scale never before contemplated to protect Florida's coastal estuaries and to better revive, restore and preserve the Everglades.

In May this year, the SFWMD announced that because of the economic situation they were acquiring only 73,000 acres with an option to purchase an additional 107,000 acres over the next ten years. Projects are contemplated that will improve water quality treatment to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades and prevent tons of harmful nutrients from entering the fragile ecosystem. However the sugar company is leasing back some of the land and will continue to farm it for the next few years.

Can it work?

Environmentalists are concerned about three issues all of which could affect the plan's outcome. If attempts are made to satisfy all the various interest groups — conservation, wildlife, fishing, hunting, farming and urban dwellers - it could lead to the plan being diluted. There is also concern about how the plan is being rolled out and who reaps the early benefits. For instance, the Everglades National Park in the far south will have to wait decades before planned projects are implemented. The final, and perhaps most serious concern, is that much of the work is untested because it has never been done before.

If they get it wrong, one of the world's most spectacular habitats could be lost for ever.

If the scientists and engineers get it right, not only will the Everglades be fully returned to its former magnificence it will provide a tried and proven formula that can be used to restore similarly threatened habitats around the world.

Every drop of water makes a difference

07/11/2009

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Sanibel Captiva Islander

Michael W. Sole

On June 30, Governor Charlie Crist signed Senate Bill 2080, relating to water resources, into law. Although the bill is not perfect, it is my firm belief a belief that I expressed to the Governor that this bill should be signed for the many benefits it provides to both to the environment and the people of Florida.

Although the new law requires the Governing Boards of the state's five water management districts to delegate authority to approve permits to their executive directors, each of the water management districts have been and will continue to be committed to open government and transparency.

The simple fact is nothing in Senate Bill 2080 diminishes, alters, or limits the ability of the public from inquiring or obtaining information about a permit application or objecting to an application.

While much attention has focused on delegation, many other aspects of the bill offer greater protection for Florida's water resources that have gone largely unnoticed. However, these changes will help ensure the protection and conservation of Florida's water resources. They include:

Changes to Florida law regarding environmentally-friendly landscaping. The use of Florida-friendly landscaping and other measures by homeowners is an effort to conserve Florida's water resources, which is in the best interest of all Floridians.

Expands lands eligible to receive compensation to local governments. This provision puts into

Florida law a commitment of the South Florida Water Management District to ensure the smaller Glades communities are not adversely impacted by the U.S. Sugar land acquisition.

Streamlines government and saves taxpayer dollars allowing meetings to be conducted via technology and authorizing the use of certain long-term permits.

Provides fiscally sound policies that ensure the water management districts do not overextend their financial commitments.

Every drop of water makes a difference to Florida's future, and we must continue to protect and wisely manage our water resources. There is no doubt that Florida's environment is better protected when all stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. As a result, I am committed to preserving the public process throughout this next year. I will continue working with the executive directors of the state's five water management districts to ensure openness and transparency.

In addition, I look forward to working with the 2010 Legislature to develop a process that sustains transparency and stakeholder participation.

Michael W. Sole

Secretary

Florida Department of Environmental Protection

Water district bill is good for the state

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Pensacola News Journal

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Michael W. Sole is secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Water Management Boards Lose Vote, but Will Ensure Openness

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07/10/2009

Ledger - Online, The

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MICHAEL W. SOLE

Delays, price hikes make a muck of \$800 million Everglades project

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07/10/2009

Palm Beach Post

Quinlan, Paul

Deep in the cane fields south of Lake Okeechobee, a massive construction site sits abandoned along U.S. 27, its dreams for the Everglades unfulfilled.

Bulldozers and earthmovers reduced a vast swath of these 25 square miles to a gray moonscape of pooled water and piled rock - traces from what was supposed to have become the world's largest free-standing reservoir.

Officially called the A1 Reservoir, this environmental Stonehenge carried an \$800 million price tag and big-name endorsements from the likes of Al Gore and Jeb Bush.

The plan was to build an above-ground lake of colossal dimensions to feed water into the parched Everglades. It would be nearly the size of Boca Raton and hold more water than 100,000 Olympic-size swimming pools. Its 22-mile perimeter wall would stand three stories tall. Construction was slated to end next year.

Instead, the project has become one of the most expensive false starts in the largely fruitless effort to restore the Everglades, in which the A1 Reservoir was a crucial element.

Two years and \$272 million into construction, the South Florida Water Management District suddenly ordered work on the reservoir halted in May 2008. Six months later, water managers canceled construction altogether, incurring fees and penalties that could add up to another \$40 million.

The land may still be used to repair the Everglades, but much of the money spent can never be recaptured - for example, \$113 million to build a rock-crushing plant that contractors later dismantled. And about 200 workers who say they were promised at least three years of work were laid off.

The shutdown coincided with Gov. Charlie Crist's announcement of an even bolder and costlier Everglades restoration initiative: a \$1.75 billion state buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp. and its 180,000-acre farming empire, land perfectly situated to recreate the historic flows of the Everglades.

Water managers say Crist's U.S. Sugar deal, made public in June 2008, did not influence their decision one month earlier to halt work on the A1 Reservoir. But today, officials concede they cannot afford to pay for both at once, even though Crist has trimmed the U.S. Sugar deal to \$536 million for 73,000 acres.

The land deal will require scrapping the reservoir plan, as the larger Everglades restoration blueprint is overhauled to incorporate the new acreage. It's worth it, say the governor and his environmental allies, who view the U.S. Sugar deal as a historic opportunity.

"I think the benefits of doing better in the long run far exceed the costs," said district board member Shannon Estenoz.

But others question whether the change of course was worth the extraordinary expense - not to mention the delay in rescuing an ecosystem on the verge of collapse.

"What the district has done was to walk away from the original Everglades restoration plan," said Mike Collins, a district board member and critic of the U.S. Sugar deal. "We were ready to go, and now we're in limbo."

The A1 Reservoir project grew out of its own celebrated land purchase.

In December 1997, then-Vice President Gore announced that the state and federal governments would buy out the Talisman Sugar Corp. The 63,000 acres acquired in the \$152 million deal would be used to store and cleanse billions of gallons of water to help hydrate the Everglades.

Completed in 1999, it was at the time the largest single land deal aimed at Everglades restoration. Years later, the water district carved out a 16,700-acre portion and called it the A1 Reservoir.

The reservoir was to be a keystone of a 68-piece, \$10.9 billion Everglades restoration plan that Congress passed in 2000. The deal called for the state and feds to split the costs 50-50, but bickering between the parties and a lack of money from Congress ground the restoration to a crawl.

Estenoz said she's hopeful that the days of inertia are over for the restoration, based on promises from the Obama administration to loosen the flow of dollars from Washington.

"The problem over the last eight or nine years has been one of leadership," she said.

Gov. Bush thought as much in 2004, when he proposed to break through the paralysis with "Acceler8," a \$1.5 billion program in which the district would borrow the money to build the 62-billion-gallon A1 Reservoir and other Everglades projects.

New obstacles arose, however. For one, the reservoir's estimated \$400 million price tag doubled, which the state blamed on rising construction costs and tougher levee-construction standards set after Hurricane Katrina.

There were other, more questionable expenses that the contractor, Barnard Parsons Joint Venture, tried to add to the bill - about \$18 million worth, a district audit reported. For example, the audit found that the company charged wear-and-tear on its pickup trucks that amounted to twice the cost of replacing the entire fleet.

In another cloud over the project, the Natural Resources Defense Council and two other environmental groups sued the Corps of Engineers in May 2007, demanding assurances that the reservoir would serve only the Everglades, not farms or development.

The groups explicitly said they did not want construction halted. But the district did just that one year later, citing uncertainty over the suit's outcome. Environmentalists were dumbfounded.

"We actually wrote them a letter and said, 'This is ridiculous,'" said NRDC attorney Brad Sewell. "It was pretty clear they were going to blame it on us."

A month later, Crist went public with news of the U.S. Sugar deal, which the state had been negotiating for months. The A1 plans would have to change.

Unmentioned was a full accounting of the penalties for shutting down the reservoir project: Six monthly payments of \$1.9 million to suspend the project. An additional \$1.5 million payment for canceling the contract. And as much as \$26 million to break down the construction operation.

Meanwhile, the jobs that the state had repeatedly boasted of disappeared.

"They were tossing 200 onto the job market in Belle Glade," said Troy Mann, one of the workers, who have since filed a class-action suit against the district and contractor. "Most of them couldn't get work. ... It was a terrible disaster."

As for that NRDC lawsuit, a judge in June dismissed the case as moot, noting that the A1 Reservoir has been scrapped.

In the final order, U.S. District Judge Donald Middlebrooks quotes former Chief Justice Warren Burger: "It is not the function of the judiciary to provide 'effective leadership' simply because the political branches of government fail to do so."

Road to a reservoir

December 1997: Vice President Al Gore announces that the state and federal governments will buy Talisman Sugar Corp.'s 50,960 acres in Palm Beach and Hendry counties to store and clean water for the Everglades.

March 1999: The feds and water managers close on the Talisman deal, which includes land swaps with other growers to acquire a total of 63,000 acres. The final price: \$152 million. Growers can lease the land for farming until construction starts.

October 2004: Frustrated with federal inaction, Gov. Jeb Bush announces a \$1.5 billion initiative to speed up construction of Everglades projects. They include the 16,700-acre A1 Reservoir on a swath of the Talisman land.

December 2005: Florida Crystals Corp., one of the sugar companies farming the Talisman tracts, refuses to vacate the property so construction can start. The district solves the impasse by giving Crystals a \$8.9 million contract to manage land.

Aug. 2, 2006: Bush flies to western Palm Beach County for the groundbreaking of the 16,700-acre A1 reservoir. The project has a \$440 million price and a 2010 due date.

May 2007: The Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation sue the Army Corps of Engineers, demanding assurances that the reservoir will aid the Everglades. They don't ask that construction be halted.

January 2008: Auditors report that contractor Barnard-Parsons Joint Venture has hit up the district for dubious charges that threatened to add \$18 million to the reservoir's costs.

May 2008: The district halts construction, citing uncertainty about the suit against the corps. The reservoir's projected price tag has risen to \$800 million.

June 2008: Gov. Charlie Crist unveils a \$1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar and its 180,000 acres (later reduced to \$536 million for 73,000 acres). Plans for the reservoir likely must be redrawn.

December 2008: The district ends the A1 project.

Water resources bill should be signed

07/10/2009

Coral Gables Gazette

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