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Land Deal Likely to Improve Everglades, Ecologists Say

05/20/2010

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Inside Science News Service

Mary Caperton Morton

WASHINGTON (ISNS) -- Tom Brokaw, Miss Florida, and the all stars of Florida Everglades advocacy came to Washington on May 19 to discuss the progress of restoration efforts. Packed into a small room down the street from the Capitol building, the environmentalists broke into cheers when the Obama administration unveiled a \$324 million plan for new bridges to lift sections of a highway that now blocks water flow in the wetlands.

But panel speakers at the Everglades Summit made no big announcements about one of the most ambitious and controversial pieces of the \$12 billion restoration puzzle -- a plan to buy agricultural land between the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee to the north. The purchase has been stalled by lawsuits and is under review in Florida's Supreme Court.

While debates continue to rage about the economics and politics of the \$536 million land deal, Florida's wetland ecologists agree that, scientifically speaking, it is the best way to start to restoring much-needed water flow to Florida's "River of Grass".

Over the past 60 years as much as half of the wetland has been replaced by trickling canals and nutrient-hungry sugar cane. Everglades National Park is the third largest park in the lower 48 states, but according to the National Park Service, its 1.5 million acres protects less than half of the wetland's original territory. The rest has been drained and developed into cities and into a vast swath of citrus and sugarcane-dominated farmland called the Everglades Agricultural Area.

This development has sapped water from south Florida's famous wetlands and left them with ion and salinity "levels

closer to an estuary rather than a fresh water system”, said Ronald Best, a wetlands ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Fort Lauderdale.

William Orem, a geochemist with the USGS in Reston, Va. who studies pollution in the Everglades, estimated that sulfate levels in the Everglades are already 60 times higher than pre-agricultural levels. Phosphorous, chloride, calcium, copper and iron are also found in alarmingly high concentrations and mercury levels in fish and wading birds are among the highest anywhere in the U.S.

With numbers like those, few would argue that the Everglades needs no ecological intervention. So in 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, a jointly federal and state funded plan comprised of 50-plus projects to be completed over 30 years at a cost of more than \$10 billion, making it the most comprehensive and expensive environmental repair plan ever undertaken in the U.S. One of CERP's many goals was to increase freshwater flow into the Everglades by one-third. To this end, in 2008 the state of Florida proposed a \$1.75 billion dollar plan to buy 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation land south of Lake Okeechobee.

Two years and a recession later, that original plan has been reduced to \$536 million dollars for 73,000 acres. And while the smaller price tag has appeased some critics, others, including Republican Florida state senator Paula Dockery, still have concerns about the patchwork nature of the land deal – the six tracts being offered for sale by U.S. Sugar don't directly connect. And a dozen other Everglades restoration projects may have to be put on hold due to the expense of the land purchase, including a massive \$300 million dollar water reservoir already underway in Palm Beach county.

According to Thomas Van Lent, a hydrologist with the Everglades Foundation, the current land deal, while frustratingly patchwork, is still an important step in the right direction. “There are lots of political and economic issues swirling around this U.S. Sugar deal, but you're not hearing much about the science, because it's not that controversial,” Van Lent said. “We know what needs to be done [to help the Everglades] and how to do it,” he said.

“Water quality is the Achilles' heel of this whole freshwater plan,” said Orem. “Right now they're trying to move more water down into the park through the canal system, which is probably the worst way to do it,” he said. “Canals don't support the natural biogeochemical processes that remove contaminants.”

By purchasing land south of Lake Okeechobee, the South Florida Water Management District will not only gain more access to the lake water, it will also gain the land it needs to clean and filter the water to make it Everglades-ready.

Lake Okeechobee has been badly contaminated by half a century of fertilizer and pesticide-heavy agriculture, “so we shouldn't just dump that water into the Everglades,” Orem said. Instead, the parcels purchased from U.S. Sugar will be converted back into marshlands, which will naturally filter the heavily polluted Lake Okeechobee water before it is swept into the park.

“Wetlands are very effective at removing toxic levels of nutrients such as nitrogen and phosphorous,” said Stephen Davis, a wetlands ecologist with the Everglades Foundation, a non-profit conservation and restoration group based in Palmetto Bay, Fla. “Recreating these marshes is a closer approximation to how the Everglades used to work, as opposed to chemical treatment plants.”

Although the new reduced acreage plan is less than ideal -- the patchwork map will continue to make water delivery tricky -- Davis said taking any amount of farmland land out of production is good for the Everglades. And if enough parcels of land could eventually be bought and traded, water could move through these marshes from the lake all the way south to the park.

But despite what scientists say are clear ecologic benefits, the U.S. Sugar land deal, originally scheduled to close March 31 but recently extended until September 30, continues to be fiercely criticized by Senator Dockery, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush and thousands of Florida taxpayers, mainly due to its high price tag and long timeframe: Purchasing all the U.S. Sugar land and engineering a continuous sheet-flow of water through it from the lake into the park is estimated to cost a staggering \$12 billion. Reaching CERP's goal of increasing freshwater flow into the Everglades by a third “will probably take years, if not decades,” said Van Lent.

Van Lent conceded the land purchase may put some other restoration projects on hold, including the oft-cited reservoir and a proposed series of underground wells, but he said restored marshlands are a more ecologically sound way to store and deliver freshwater anyway. “The economic realities are going to force us to prioritize, which is always hard,” he said. “But land is key and I do think this plan is going to be a good for the Everglades in the long run.”

By pushing back the close of sale deadline by six months, the South Florida Water Management District will have more time to address some of the deal's financial and political pitfalls. So for now, convinced ecologists will have to wait and

see.

ISNS staff writer Devin Powell contributed to this report.

ENVIRONMENT: Audubon Society adventurers take educational trip through the Everglades

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05/21/2010

Miami Herald, The

Barbara Hall

A group of 14 people from the National Audubon Society -- including the wife and daughter of comedian Chevy Chase -- took a three-day trip through the Everglades.

Snapshot: A Ghost Orchid. The rare flower that's as delicate as a tiny Origami piece.

Snapshot: The "Panther Cam." A near-camouflage device posted in the Everglades to keep track of the at-risk panther population.

Snapshot: An imitation owl call breaks the quiet of the Corkscrew Sanctuary. A baby, mother and father owl swoop down to the swamp buggy to seek out the owl call.

These scenes, and many more, derive from a three-day sweep through the Everglades. There were 14 adventurers, a majority of them members of National Audubon's Women in Conservation Program.

For most of the travelers, this was a "maiden voyage" -- their first time touring the Everglades. The "campers" could have been cut from the pages of Vanity Fair: Allison Rockefeller, married to the grandson of Nelson A. Rockefeller and a mainstay in the women's wing of the National Audubon Society; and Jayni Chase, wife of comedian Chevy Chase, as quick with the quip as her husband and an environmental education leader.

"We traveled any way we could: on boardwalk and amphibious swamp buggy in the magical Corkscrew Swamp; via bus down the Tamiami Trail, past Big Cypress Preserve and Water Conservation Area 3A and 3B; via National Park Service tram into the Shark River Slough (the modernist Overlook Tower is part Edward Hopper lighthouse, part Guggenheim Museum); by thrilling airboat to a Miccosukee hammock; on hardy out-motors to Flamingo; and by kayak around the western keys of Florida Bay," Allison wrote.

"Not the challenges of Lewis and Clark" she adds, "but not a walk in the park, either." The trip was a prelude to the National Audubon's Rachel Carson Awards Council gala, held last week in New York. Allison Rockefeller founded the council in 2004 to educate women on issues pertaining to conservation and the environment.

Called "of global importance" by the United Nations' UNESCO, the Everglades has been threatened by chemical runoff from the sugar farms, invasive species and now, the potential of oil seeping into the marshes from the BP oil spill. Wading bird populations have plunged by 90 percent over recent years, authorities say.

The Everglades' restoration project, which involves the state buying massive tracts from U.S. Sugar in a \$536 million deal, also is mired in lawsuits. The Miccosukee Tribe, along with a rival sugar firm and environmental groups, have filed multiple lawsuits and motions to block the deal, saying, among other things, that the deal would protect the federal park lands but expose other property to increased pollution.

Since March, federal judges in two separate cases ruled that the state, working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, dragged its feet in cleaning up the Everglades.

It was these environmental concerns that led the group on the trip. Longtime Audubon activist Margo Ernst, a New York resident who made the trip, likes to refer to "our legends of the past, heroes of the future."

The phrase may have been crafted for, among others, Jayni Chase, who brought grown daughter Cydney on the trip.

"The sugar refinery north of the Everglades contributes pollution to the water table," she noted. "We must find a way to divert the chemicals from the sugar plantations."

The trip was organized by John Flicker, who had been the president of the National Audubon Society for 15 years before stepping down in January. He also had been the Florida director of The Nature Conservancy, a position that led to his Everglades passion.

``I have to be optimistic," he replies. ``We can't tell the next generation that we've let the Everglades die."

EDITORIAL: Solution needed

05/22/2010

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Cape Coral Daily Breeze

Last Wednesday, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District started a 10-day series of scheduled water releases from Lake Okeechobee. This release is supposed to end this weekend, but with the rainy season - and hurricane season - just around the corner, future water releases into the Caloosahatchee and neighboring rivers, bays and estuaries may continue well into the summer months.

None of this is good news for us here in the Cape or on Sanibel, least of all the marine wildlife and ecosystems which makes their home in Southwest Florida waterways.

Recent water levels at Lake Okeechobee have hovered above 15 feet. The last time the water level rose above 15 feet - following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 - the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers authorized a high volume release of water due to the threat of flooding to towns which surround the lake.

As a result of those high volume releases from Lake O, a significant amount of red drift algae washed up on Sanibel and Captiva's beaches. Experts say that those releases contributed to killing marine grasses and oyster beds throughout the Caloosahatchee and within the bays and estuaries of Southwest Florida.

Many experts are confounded by the reasoning behind the Lake O releases.

So, why five years later, confronted by the same problem, has a solution never been established?

According to PURRE, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers first needs to repair the Herbert Hoover Dike.

Second, the SFWMD - which pledged in 2005 to provide some 450,000 acre-feet of water storage area, an amount equivalent to one foot of water off the lake - has never followed through on that promise.

We recognize that such a storage system is not going to be constructed overnight, or even in the coming months, but doing nothing to correct the problem is unacceptable. Both the Army Corps and SFWMD must explore viable options - such as establishing a spillway between the two westernmost canals feeding into the Everglades Agricultural Area, creating a flow-way south of Lake O - if they wish to show even a modest concern for the health of our delicate ecosystems which could again be negatively impacted by large water releases.

"Until alternative storage is available and the U.S. Sugar purchase moves forward, there are few alternatives for the amount of water being dumped out the estuaries to tide," said Carla Brooks Johnston, former Mayor of Sanibel.

There is a plan to incorporate 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land - 377,000 acres less than what was initially conceived - for water treatment and storage within the Everglades Agricultural Area.

That's not perfect, and it hasn't come close to clearing all the legal hurdles but it would be a reasonable start. In fact, Johnston notes, the U.S. Sugar purchase is "the most meaningful opportunity" we have to relieve the high flows to the Caloosahatchee and St Lucie rivers. As a result, this could recreate the natural flows south out of Lake O to the Everglades, Everglades National Park, Florida Bay and Biscayne Bay. In other words, dumping 3.2 billion gallons of water each day out of the lake would cease.

That sounds like a pretty good solution to us. We urge our readers to support this idea and let our state and federal policy-makers know how important the creation of water storage areas surrounding Lake Okeechobee are.

It is time to find a solution and fulfill a promise.

Florida's overseer of oil spill has friends, foes

05/23/2010

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Tallahassee Democrat

Ash, Jim

A former Marine captain who spent 16 years climbing to the top of the Department of Environmental Protection, Mike Sole is the consummate and even-keeled bureaucrat always at the center of Florida's stormiest environmental debates.

Now that the 46-year-old Fort Pierce native is leading the state's response to BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill, admirers are praising his accessibility and attention to detail while critics worry about what they see as a history of caving in to polluters.

Linda Young, head of the Florida chapter of the Clean Water Network, has fought Sole in court and won over the state's failure to rigorously enforce the federal Clean Water Act.

"My biggest fear is that he won't stand up to BP," Young said. "Mike Sole knows what the Legislature wants, and through them, what the special interests want."

What everyone wants is a quick and painless solution to the largest ecological disaster ever to threaten Florida's shores.

But since the April 20 explosion that killed 11 workers and unleashed the massive plume, Sole has reminded people why there is no such thing.

"This is a difficult paradigm," Sole said. "Florida has a good history of responding to natural disasters. Here we have a long-term event, a man-made disaster. I'm just trying to explain that."

The job, which also includes reminding the traveling public that Florida's beaches remain untouched, has grown into 16-hour days with few breaks. A weekend off has become a distant memory.

"If I wasn't working this weekend, I'd be out fishing," he said.

Sole is convinced that BP is working as hard as possible to cap the well, and said he was optimistic that efforts will succeed.

However, he acknowledges that he's "frustrated," that BP that has not been forthcoming about the size of the spill, or an underwater plume that remains a hidden menace.

The Obama administration is ordering BP to come up with more information, Sole said, "and hopefully, some of that transparency will trickle down to the states."

On May 4 BP gave Florida \$25 million to help local governments prepare for the spill, but counties complain that the money has forced them to compete with each other for a finite resource. Local officials are frustrated at a hierarchy that has Sole - and BP - signing off on plans while they wait for the spill to roll ashore.

The Bay County Commission has sued BP for more compensation.

"Relying on BP is like relying on the arsonist to stand around and tell you how to put out the fire," said Fort Lauderdale lawyer Robert McKee, who is representing the county.

McKee is part of a 10-law firm group encouraging local governments to take BP to court. McKee said Sole and the state are locked into procedures that prevent his clients from mustering the best defenses possible.

"They're frozen out," he said.

One of the biggest outstanding projects in Sole's administration is Everglades restoration, a massive cleanup plan that environmental critics, and at least two federal judges, say has been too-long delayed.

Less than two years ago, Crist announced a \$1.7 billion plan to buy 290 square miles of U.S. Sugar land around Lake Okeechobee. It has been downsized twice, now standing at \$536 million for 114 square miles. Sole has appeared at

every news conference, claiming victory over the deal.

Sole still says he will count Everglades restoration, and the deal initiated by Crist, among the biggest accomplishments of his tenure.

Sole's diplomacy has won him admirers in the Legislature.

"He's a protector of the environment, but he's also cognizant of economic environment in Florida and we need both," said Rep. Ralph Poppell, a conservative Republican from Vero Beach who chairs an environmental appropriations committee. "We don't always have to agree for us to still work together and find a solution. I find that commendable."

Sole calls Everglades plan his crown jewel

05/24/2010

News-Press

Ash, Jim

One of the biggest outstanding projects in Mike Sole's administration as secretary of the state Department of Environmental Protection is Everglades restoration, a massive cleanup plan that environmental critics - and at least two federal judges - say has been too-long delayed.

Less than two years ago, Gov. Crist announced a \$1.7 billion plan to buy 290 square miles of U.S. Sugar land around Lake Okeechobee. The purchase has been downsized twice, now standing at \$536 million for 114 square miles. Sole has appeared at every press conference, claiming victory over the deal.

Sole still says he will count Everglades restoration - and the deal initiated by Crist - among the biggest accomplishments of his tenure.

"We've invested more than \$1 billion. I'll tell you, everyone has been looking at their budgets. These are difficult times," Sole said.

Sole has fought to preserve Florida Forever, the nation's largest environmental land-buying program, but he was forced to watch it fall to recession and budget constraints.

Last year, lawmakers failed to fund it for the first time in two decades. This spring, lawmakers found \$25 million, but did not allow managers to leverage the money with bonds at a time when supporters argue that land is cheap.

Sole acknowledges that there is still "a long way to go," to lowering phosphorous levels and cleaning up Florida's waters.

Yet Sole's diplomacy has won admirers in the Legislature.

"He's a protector of the environment, but he's also cognizant of economic environment in Florida and we need both," said Rep. Ralph Poppell, a conservative Republican from Vero Beach who chairs an environmental appropriations committee. "We don't always have to agree for us to still work together and find a solution. I find that commendable."

OP-ED: U.S. Sugar acquisition only option for our estuary and Everglades

05/25/2010

News-Press

Ray Judah

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Due to exceedingly high water levels in Lake Okeechobee, billions of gallons of polluted lake water are currently being released to the Caloosahatchee River.

In the absence of adequate storage or the ability to send water south to the Everglades, these releases result in continued destruction of our coastal estuaries.

Releases also waste large freshwater supplies that could be utilized by both residents and agriculture during drought. Currently, these serious concerns are trumped by the health and safety threat posed by the unreliable Herbert Hoover Dike.

Until the U.S. Sugar land acquisition is completed, there is literally no opportunity of meeting state and federal water quality standards in the Everglades or of preventing the damaging releases to the coastal estuaries.

Florida's intensive drainage projects and current water management regime replaced expansive natural wetlands with sugar and development.

We lost the system's natural connectivity that historically cleaned and managed the massive amounts of water that flowed from Orlando to Florida Bay.

During previous restoration planning, sugar farmers south of Lake Okeechobee refused to relinquish land needed to provide this vital storage and connectivity - forcing engineers and scientists to rely on the politically expedient, but highly questionable, aquifer storage and recovery wells and rock pits to provide the massive storage needed to restore the system.

Today, we finally have a willing seller in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

U.S. Sugar has 180,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee that can be used to store and clean huge amounts of water.

This purchase, along with proper planning and engineering, could prevent further damage to the estuaries and enable cleaner water to be sent south without violating the stringent water quality standards in the Everglades.

But once again, politics and powerful sugar interests threaten restoration.

Business rival Florida Crystals is suddenly concerned that the U.S. Sugar land acquisition will threaten restoration, a handy smoke screen to cover their strategic business interests.

- Ray Judah, is the Lee County commissioner for District 3.

AT&T Spends Big on Fla. Lobbying

05/25/2010

News Service of Florida, The
Peltier, Michael

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TALLAHASSEE | Despite a modest agenda, communications giant AT&T spent up to \$1.1 million in the first quarter of 2010 on lobbyists, more than any other principal.

Compensation reports submitted to the Florida Legislature show the company again outdistancing any other and show a near tripling of lobby expenses reported for the quarter ending March 31.

State lawmakers involved in communications issues said there was no particularly big issue that would have sparked such an increase in spending and others said the company has always spent a lot on lobbying efforts regardless of whether there was a particular issue in play.

The most conservative estimates show AT&T spending \$401,000 in the quarter, nearly three times larger than its 2009 low-end estimate of \$150,000. On the high end, the company may have spent up to \$1.1 million, up from \$370,000 it reported for the same period last year.

Lobbying compensation reports allow principals to report spending in ranges, making an exact amount difficult to determine.

Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, and member of the Senate Communications, Energy and Public Utilities Committee, said the company had no major issues before the panel this session. Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, and member of the Government Operations Policy and Steering Committee, concurred.

AT&T was also one of the top spenders last year. Others in the list of top lobbying spenders in the first quarter of this year included other companies that routinely spend the most.

U.S. Sugar Corp spent up to \$329,991 during the most recent quarter, more than double the \$140,000 spent during the 2009.

Competitor Florida Crystals spent up to \$200,000 during the period as both parties wrangled over a proposed \$536 million sale of U.S. Sugar land to the state. Florida Crystals opposes the 73,000-acre sale, which is now being challenged in the Florida Supreme Court.

Competing tobacco companies also spread money around, as companies tried to persuade or prevent lawmakers from including smaller cigarette makers into the group that pays the into a state tobacco lawsuit settlement.

Currently several big tobacco companies pay, but some lawmakers have suggested small companies that didn't settle with Florida a decade ago should also pay into the fund.

Dosal Tobacco Corp spent as much as \$250,000 in the first quarter of the year. The Miami company is a small producer fighting being added to the settlement. Competitor Altria Client Services, the parent of Philip Morris, spent between \$90,000 and \$150,000 on lobbying - it wanted the smaller non-settling companies added - also making the top 20 for the quarter. Lawmakers ended up not adding the smaller companies to the settlement.

Health care companies also continued to spend. Facing tight budgets and possible changes to the state Medicaid delivery system, Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida spent up to \$230,000 for the quarter, up \$150,000 from a year earlier. HCA Healthcare, followed closely behind, spending up to \$210,000 in early 2010, up for \$70,000 in 2009. The Florida Medical Association spent up to \$100,000 for the period.

Gaming companies also spent heavily as lawmakers weighed a compact with the Seminole Tribe and how to protect existing gaming interests.

Greyhound dog track owner Hartman & Tyner shelled out \$170,000 on lobbying during the period in which the Seminole Tribe of Florida also spent up to \$120,000. The compact eventually was approved.

