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Total Clips: 2

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
 OP-ED: U.S. Sugar land buy costly, not needed for Everglades restoration	06/08/2010	News-Press	George H. Wedgworth
 OP-ED: Water managers working to restore balance for Caloosahatchee River	06/05/2010	News-Press	Charles Dauray

OP-ED: U.S. Sugar land buy costly, not needed for Everglades restoration

[Return to Top](#)

06/08/2010

News-Press

George H. Wedgworth

Commissioner Ray Judah's guest opinion entitled "U.S. Sugar acquisition only option for our estuary and the Everglades," May 25, begs for an honest response.

U.S. Sugar understands the problems in the system and what the solutions are, but gave up working collaboratively with all parties in exchange for a big payday.

Before U.S. Sugar Corp. struck a taxpayer-funded deal with Gov. Charlie Crist to buy them out, they were on record time and time again supporting vital Everglades restoration projects, including the state's Acceler8 effort, focusing on cleaning polluted water north of Lake Okeechobee and building storage reservoirs to benefit the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries (specifically the C-43 and C-44 reservoir projects).

Now, U.S. Sugar and critics of agriculture have changed their tune and have abandoned the science behind Everglades restoration in favor of a massive tax-funded sale and leaseback deal that will only mean millions to U.S. Sugar's bottom line.

U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President and former SFWMD Governing Board member Bubba Wade wrote a March 26, 2006, guest column in the Fort Pierce Tribune stating, "I can assure you that storing water in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) will not solve the problems with Lake Okeechobee or prevent massive discharges to the estuaries during wet years. Technical data from the SFWMD indicates that 97 percent of the water flow comes from the northern half of the Lake Okeechobee watershed..."

The Lake and estuary problems are not caused south of the Lake and cannot be fixed by merely relocating polluted Lake Okeechobee water there... Gov. Jeb Bush committed the state to begin building more than \$1 billion worth of projects, igniting the state's half of the state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP).

The SFWMD has already broken ground on many of these Acceler8 projects which place additional storage north, south, east and west. In addition, the Lake Okeechobee Estuary Recovery Plan will focus on storing and cleaning water north of the lake. Together these initiatives will continue to improve the system from top to bottom."

We fully support completing the construction on the three storage reservoirs where the SFWMD already owns the land, construction and pilot projects are under way and conditional federal authorization has already been obtained. Why trade projects that were under way for an opportunity to acquire land encumbered with long term leases, "maxing out the SFWMD's credit card" with no way of funding the construction of features thus assuring that no real relief for the Everglades or estuaries is in sight for a decade or more?

All stakeholders should embrace science-driven restoration using the assets that the SFWMD already owns and completing projects that will provide meaningful results for the Everglades and estuaries.

Pitting stakeholders against each other isn't productive in protecting the south Florida ecosystem.

Let's stop the rhetoric and get back to producing results.

— George H. Wedgworth is president and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida.

OP-ED: Water managers working to restore balance for Caloosahatchee River

[Return to Top](#)

06/05/2010

News-Press

Charles Dauray

An unusually wet “dry” season has forced South Florida's water managers into an all-too-familiar balancing act.

Since Nov. 1, the 16-county region of the South Florida Water Management District, including Lee County, has received an average of almost 6 inches of rain more than normal. As recently as May 10, Lake Okeechobee's water level stood above 15 feet — on the upper end of the management range used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The high lake level, the arrival of the wet season and forecasts for an active hurricane season have created the balancing act for the corps and the district between the competing needs of flood control, public safety, water supply and the ecosystem.

Working with a fixed system with limited storage and a 730-square-mile lake surrounded by the aging Herbert Hoover Dike, the corps has been releasing water from the lake into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers to protect public safety.

Southwest Florida residents are understandably frustrated with that decision. They do not need to be reminded of the harmful effects these freshwater releases have had on the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary in past years. The district hears these concerns and is taking every reasonable step possible to evaluate and implement strategies that will minimize the need for lake releases when our region has an overabundance of water.

Working with an assortment of other agencies, environmental organizations, ranchers and researchers, the District has added 126,350 acre-feet of surface water storage capacity on private, public and tribal lands around Lake Okeechobee since 2005. This additional storage has been made available through regional public projects and a district program that encourages property owners to hold water on their land rather than drain it and to store regional runoff.

More storage is potentially available through planned projects, provided issues related to water quality, endangered species protection and funding can be addressed. The district is also examining the feasibility of storing water north and south of the lake on district lands and sites set aside for Everglades restoration projects.

While these alternative water storage programs have shown potential, they cannot relieve the burden on the estuaries alone. For some perspective, 450,000 acre-feet of alternative storage in the watershed would potentially ease about a foot of water off the lake. Yet a single foot of rainfall in the watershed draining into the big lake can produce a 4-foot rise in water level virtually overnight.

The long-term solution for reducing freshwater discharges to the estuaries from Lake Okeechobee has to include the ongoing rehabilitation of the 75-year-old earthen dike that surrounds it. The Corps of Engineers recently awarded a \$40 million contract for repairs to the most vulnerable section of the Herbert Hoover Dike, a 22-mile segment between Port Mayaca and Belle Glade. Improving the integrity of the dike will enable the corps to safely contain more water in the lake instead of sending it to the coasts.

Everglades restoration efforts also promise to substantially increase water storage to the benefit of the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries. Over the last year, we have seen significant forward momentum on the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, which will eventually enable more clean water to go south to the Everglades — where it is needed. In addition, the district's planned acquisition of 73,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. will create unprecedented opportunities to store water that were never envisioned by CERP.

The Southwest Florida residents who live, work and play on the Caloosahatchee River depend on the health of the river and its estuary. The district will continue to work with the corps, its partners and concerned stakeholders to ensure balanced decision-making and secure permanent solutions to protect and improve our treasured ecosystem.

— Charles Dauray represents Southwest Florida on the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District.

