

George H. Wedgworth: U.S. Sugar land buy costly, not needed for Everglades restoration

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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

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