

Ray Judah: Bad data must not stop crucial Everglades land buy

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A recent guest opinion by George Wedgworth, president and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, to discredit state purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation land south of Lake Okeechobee was deceitful and fundamentally flawed.

Mr. Wedgworth suggests that the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan will adequately address the need for storage and treatment of polluted water released from Lake Okeechobee that has caused adverse impact to coastal estuaries on the west and east coast of South Florida.

Unfortunately, the Central and South Florida Flood Control project model used as the basis for Everglades restoration under CERP is seriously flawed because the model incorporated data collected from a 30-year dry cycle between 1965-95. The South Florida Water Management District underestimated the need for water storage to restore the Everglades and properly manage Lake Okeechobee.

An evaluation of the annual water budget for Lake Okeechobee is another cause for alarm when considering the total storage capacity of the reservoirs and storm-water treatment areas to be built under CERP. Annually, approximately 4.7 million acre feet of water enter Lake Okeechobee by inflow and rainfall, with 2.4 million acre feet of water lost to evaporation. The cumulative amount of storage expected to be provided by the additional reservoirs and storm-water treatment areas under CERP is approximately 800,000 acre feet of water. Another 500,000 acre feet of water is used by agriculture, indicating a need for an additional 1 million acre feet of water storage to minimize the devastating impact of excessive fresh water releases from Lake Okeechobee.

The SFWMD proposed plan to build 330 aquifer storage and recovery wells around the lake to store the excess water would cost in excess of \$3 billion. The uncertainty of injecting water below ground

raises serious questions as to the recovery rate and release of arsenic, contaminating ground water supplies.

Mr. Wedgworth suggests that the SFWMD Acceler8 efforts focused on building reservoirs such as C-43 on the west coast will benefit the Caloosahatchee River. Unfortunately, the design of the C-43 reservoir does not include a water quality component, and will serve as an incubator for bacteria and toxic blue-green algae that is becoming more prevalent in the Caloosahatchee River and creating public health concerns. Heavy nutrient loading of phosphorus and nitrogen, warm water, and limited circulation in the reservoir create an optimum environment for the proliferation of bacteria and algae.

The use of aerators in the reservoir to enhance circulation prevents nutrients in the water from settling to the bottom, causing nutrients to remain in suspension, resulting in further degradation of our coastal estuaries.

Mr. Wedgworth further comments that "the lake and estuary problems are not caused south of the lake" when, in fact, the sugar industry uses hundreds of thousand of acres of publicly owned lands south of the lake, known as storm-water treatment and water conservation areas, to treat and store water from their sugar cane fields, thus depriving the use of these publicly owned lands for treatment and storage of excessive surface water runoff from Lake Okeechobee.

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For decades, Lake Okeechobee, a public resource, has been managed by the SFWMD to ensure adequate storage and water supply to meet the irrigation needs of sugar cane producers. In periods of high water, the sugar industry has been allowed to back pump into Lake Okeechobee to avoid flooding of sugar cane fields resulting in excessive nutrient discharge of phosphorous and nitrogen in the lake. During periods of low water, the SFWMD has historically reserved water for irrigation of sugar cane fields and eliminated minimum fresh water flow to our coastal estuaries.

The current SFWMD Governing Board is at long last representing the public interest and recognizes that the purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land is a landmark decision to restore the Lake Okeechobee watershed and Florida Everglades.

- Ray Judah is Lee County commissioner for District 3.

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