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Eve Samples: On the 100th day, frustration about pollution of the St. Lucie River bubbled over

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07/04/2010

Stuart News

Samples, Eve

Ed Stout felt like the bad guy on Mother's Day weekend.

When 50 or so would-be paddlers showed up at his kayak shop on the South Fork of the St. Lucie River, he had to turn them all away.

Bacteria levels in the water were too high, he explained to the families. The county health department was warning people to stay out.

"I can't with good conscience put somebody in unsafe water," Stout, owner of South River Outfitters, told me.

The warnings were lifted last week, but his frustration still hangs heavy.

He has watched sea grass die and the river water become dark with sediment. On Mother's Day weekend alone, he lost about \$1,500 in business.

Stout has done everything an Average Joe can do to fight the Army Corps of Engineers' releases of polluted freshwater from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie River. (The releases are linked to the higher levels of enterococci bacteria that prompted the health department warnings, and to blue-green algae blooms that remain a risk on the river.)

"I've been to my commissioners. I've been to my congressmen," Stout said. "And nothing has changed."

He has supported the Rivers Coalition and Florida Oceanographic Society, two groups working to stop the damage. He even shook the hand of U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, who visited during a blue-green algae outbreak in 2005.

"At this point, I'm just totally frustrated and feel like nothing I do will help," Stout told me.

It's the way a lot of us feel.

For decades, when Lake Okeechobee gets in the too-high-for-comfort range — threatening the stability of the Herbert Hoover Dike — the Corps has blasted the St. Lucie River with the excess water.

The latest round of releases started March 27.

On Sunday, the 100th day, we're no closer to a solution. The Corps announced Thursday it was slowing the flood coming out of the St. Lucie Lock and Dam, but it will only ramp it up again when heavy rains return.

Looking for a long-term fix, the Rivers Coalition sued the Corps in 2006. A federal judge ruled against it in January, and the coalition appealed.

Meanwhile, another possible solution — the state's proposed purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s property south of Lake O — has deep-pocketed opponents, including rival sugar firm Florida Crystals.

We need politicians to push for the deal, but Florida Crystals is a powerful lobby.

The firm is one of the biggest contributors to U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta. The company, or individuals with connections to it, have given \$15,200 to the freshman congressman's campaigns, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

When I asked Rooney's office for his official stance last week, a spokesman responded: "Since the land purchase is a state issue, he is not interfering with this specific proposal."

It sure wouldn't hurt if our local guy threw his weight behind it, though.

George Jones, an environmental advocate known as the Indian Riverkeeper, thinks it will take another lawsuit to create any real change.

The Corps' releases into the St. Lucie River are violating clean water laws, including the Clean Water Act, he said. And the state Department of Environmental Protection is not enforcing the laws.

"We have tried to play very nicely," Jones said. "It's tough. I'm as frustrated as everyone now."

Eve Samples is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects her opinion. For more on Martin County topics, follow her blog at TCPalm.com/samples. Contact her at (772) 221-4217 or eve.samples@scripps.com.

Details, schmetails! He just wants top job

07/04/2010

St. Petersburg Times

Adam C. Smith

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Republican gubernatorial candidate Rick Scott is running as an outsider untainted by political or government experience. Check him out on Political Connections on Bay News 9 today, and it's clear he's also unburdened of any detailed policy proposals or deep knowledge of Florida government.

His take on last year's sweeping overhaul of Florida's growth management laws? "I'm not familiar with that," said Scott, a former health care executive. "I think a lot of these issues in regards to growth management ought to be local issues. We ought to decide locally."

How about the state's proposed \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. to restore the Everglades? "I don't know all the details, but here's my impression: It's great. It would be great if we had more land the state can control. Can we afford it? Will it raise our taxes and are we spending dollars to do that, to not do other restoration projects? That's my concern."

Any concerns with Florida's Bright Futures scholarship program? "Right now it's fine, but we have to look at how can we continue to afford it and if we can't how can we spend those dollars better."

What happened to 'buyer beware'?

Are political donations akin to a contract between the donor and candidate? That's what a group of Republican donors claim in a class action lawsuit suggesting Charlie Crist breached contracts when he accepted donations as a Republican candidate for the Senate and then refused to refund them after he became an independent. The lawyer leading the charge is state Rep. Tom Grady, R-Naples, and one of the plaintiffs is Jacksonville developer John Rood, finance chairman for the state GOP.

"If Defendants (Crist and his campaign) do not refund the Republican Contributions, the Class will be harmed twice:

first, the Republican Contributions will be used to support a candidate other than a Republican candidate in the Primary Election and in the General election; and, second, those Republican Contributions will be used to actively oppose the election of a Republican United States Senator from Florida."

Backup for Crist

State Sen. Mike Fasano has established a federal political committee, Friends for Freedom, to help Crist's nonpartisan Senate campaign. Helping Fasano is Ken Pruitt, who served as the Republican state Senate president when Marco Rubio was House speaker. "There's no question that Marco Rubio and Kendrick Meek, or whoever the Democratic nominee will be, is going to have a lot of financial support from Washington. It's important we do everything we can to counter that," Fasano said.

Slapping Jeb

Gov. Crist was downplaying the potential political fallout from his connections to the indicted ex-party chairman Jim Greer when he made this analogy to the Greer mess: "Jeb's feet weren't really held to the fire when that guy at Corrections got popped." Crist was referring, of course, to Jim Crosby, the former prison boss who's still serving time for taking kickbacks from contractors. For those who have been under a rock for the past 18 months, Jeb Bush is a strong supporter of Crist's Senate rival, Rubio. And Crosby's attorney, Steve Andrews, was recently listed on the host committee for a Crist-for-Senate fund-raiser in Tallahassee.

Steve Bousquet and Alex Leary contributed to this week's Buzz. Adam C. Smith can be reached at asmith@sptimes.com.

Tea party flexing muscle, feels growing pains

07/04/2010

Sun Sentinel

Anthony man

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As tea party activists try to figure out how to maximize their muscle in the 2010 elections, the movement is moving more indoors and concentrating less on outside sign-waving protests.

There's little question that the tea party movement is thriving and expanding in South Florida and the rest of the country. At the same time, it's coping with growing pains – and people inside and outside the party are wondering how big a political punch it will pack in November and beyond.

Voters partial to the tea party have high hopes.

"I'm hoping that the tea party movement will show both Democrats and Republicans that we are angry and want change in Washington," said Patricia DeBlasis, a Boca Raton homemaker. "It's snowballing. People are angry."

Among the signs of strength in South Florida:

Close to 300 people showed up last week at the first public meeting of a new Boca Raton-area branch of the tea party movement. On Saturday, a Broward tea party group joined forces with a separate Fort Lauderdale contingent, which expanded its weekly protest to three hours and a roster of dozens of speakers.

A coalition of 16 tea party groups, and similar organizations such as chapters of the Glenn Beck inspired 9-12 movement, is working to block the state's plan for the South Florida Water Management District to buy land owned by U.S. Sugar and use it for Everglades restoration.

And the tea party enjoys so much influence in the Republican Party that candidates are tripping over themselves to proclaim their allegiance to the movement.

Organizers of the new Boca Raton group landed gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum as the main speaker, and he offered himself up for the tea partiers' vetting and approval. They said they fully expect McCollum's rival for the Republican nomination, Rick Scott, to appear before them as well. The Fort Lauderdale agenda listed 17 Republican candidates who wanted to speak.

"They have a lot of clout," said Sid Dinerstein, chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party who describes himself as a lover of the tea party movement. "The tea party says [to candidates] come earn our vote."

Yet there are divisions.

The movement is so decentralized that many leaders in Broward and south Palm Beach counties don't know each other. And it's marked by vastly different approaches and objectives.

