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'Glades restoration: Acquisition of sugar land a must

By Ray Judah

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Everglades restoration has been ongoing for nearly 20 years, and there is not one project among advertisement the billions of dollars worth of state and federal projects currently on books that will provide enough water storage and treatment to stop the devastating releases to our coastal estuaries every time it rains heavily or water levels in Lake Okeechobee rise before during or after hurricane season.

However, we now have an opportunity to change this untenable situation by moving forward with the proposed acquisition of U.S. Sugar's property south of Lake Okeechobee.

It's no secret that, over the last 50-plus years, water has been stored in Lake Okeechobee or drained from the system based on what is best for the Florida sugar industry. Sugar farmers are currently occupying and farming much of the historic flood plains of the Everglades, where water from Lake Okeechobee naturally overflowed and traveled south during wet times.

Sugar farmers south of Lake Okeechobee had refused to relinquish land needed to provide this vital storage and natural connectivity of the natural Everglades system — 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.

In the absence of adequate land for storage and treatment or the ability to send large amounts of water south to the Everglades, the current water regime will continue to devastate our coastal estuaries. Flushing polluted lake water to the estuaries also wastes large freshwater supplies that could be utilized by both residents and agriculture during drought.

The massive amounts of water that must be managed on a regular basis during South Florida's frequent wet cycles were not truly taken into consideration under previously anticipated restoration plans. Without willing sellers of land to build sufficient water storage south of Lake Okeechobee, there is literally no chance of meeting the current stringent water quality standards in the Everglades much less of meeting the far more stringent standards now being set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

U.S. Sugar has finally offered to sell 180,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee that can be used to store and clean huge amounts of water. At long last, we can restore the historic southern flowway that will actually prevent further damage to the estuaries and send cleaner water south.

But, money-driven politics and powerful competing sugar interests threaten this critical opportunity by claiming this acquisition will bankrupt restoration. That is simply not true because this land will allow much more efficient restoration project planning and more natural and cost-efficient water storage and treatment options.

Most experts agree the system needs an additional million acre-feet of storage. Planned projects provide only a fraction of the storage and treatment needed to meet current water quality standards, much less the more

stringent standards and deadlines that the federal courts and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are demanding.

From every economic, environmental, and scientific perspective, a combination of storage, treatment and flow in the Everglades Agricultural Area makes the most sense. Whether shallow water conveyances or interconnecting reservoirs and storm water treatment areas, the U.S. Sugar property provides the most efficient means of storing and treating water because:

Removing large sugarcane fields greatly reduces the fertilization and drainage in the EAA and increases water availability for people and the environment.

Water can be conveyed south through existing pumps that move agricultural water today, providing the desperately needed hydrological connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Large land acquisition will enable sufficient water quality treatment marshes.

It will provide enough storage to reduce harmful discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

Public safety concerns over dike integrity would be solved by releasing large amounts of water south when high-water levels threaten the dike.

Large problems require large solutions and completing this large land acquisition is the only solution to the problems facing not only the coastal estuaries but the entire Everglades ecosystem from Orlando to Florida Bay.

Ray Judah is a Lee County commissioner.

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