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Water quality: Plan would reduce pollution in Everglades

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The time has arrived for common sense solutions to [Everglades](#) water quality challenges.

We know we cannot restore flows of freshwater into the River of Grass until we figure out how to get the water clean enough to put into the pristine Everglades. Federal courts for 20 years have been the enforcers of state requirements to reduce harmful pollution entering the Everglades.

Now a solid solution has been proposed that merits support.

The court appointed Special Master John Barkett, a seasoned attorney and mediator with an uncommon skill to the tough task sorting out complex Everglades water quality issues. He has, after taking testimony from all affected parties, now plotted a clear course forward.

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After lengthy hearings in July, Mr. Barkett has cut through the smoke and fog obscuring the way forward and is recommending to U.S. District Court Judge Frederico Moreno some smart solutions..

Two key elements of the Special Master's Recommendation are:

The South Florida Water Management District should be relieved of a purported obligation to utilize 16,000 acres of land to build a questionably located reservoir. Instead, the Special Master agrees with scientists who testified for the Florida Audubon Society, federal agencies, and the South Florida Water Management District that those lands would be better suited to construct more artificial marshes to cleanse sugar farm runoff before it reaches the Everglades.

The 26,800 acre acquisition of land from the U.S. Sugar Corp. that the South Florida Water Management District is executing with cash on hand the agency has available presents an excellent opportunity to improve Everglades water quality. The location of this U.S. Sugar land makes it ideal to expand treatment areas as a remedy to the persistent water quality violations that have hampered Everglades restoration and the resolution of litigation that has been going on for 22 years.

Special Master Barkett's recommendations are clear that the highest priority must be placed on expanding the artificial marshes in the Stormwater Treatment Areas to take more phosphorus out of the water and build a more robust cleanup system capable of handling greater surges of water.

Audubon has, for more than a decade, advocated that the current STAs, designed in the early 1990's, need to be expanded to sufficiently treat polluted runoff.

The Special Master's recommendations also resonate with the most recent findings of the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#), which on Sept. 3, 2010, issued a requirement that the SFWMD and the State of Florida expand stormwater treatment by 70 percent, or 42,000 acres over existing efforts. This EPA order for expansion matches almost exactly the acreage that can be provided by the combination of the U.S. Sugar purchase and the size of the land available at the former reservoir site.

Audubon believes that Special Master Barkett may have said it best when he wrote the following in his recommendation to Judge Moreno, "Everglades or Neverglades? At some point, political and business leaders have to implement their commitment to save this Florida and United States ecological treasure; promises just won't do anymore."

All who care for the Everglades should join together in the hope that Judge Moreno will fully embrace the recommendations of Special Master John Barkett and help assure that Florida and national political leaders swiftly carry out his well reasoned plan.

Eric Draper is executive director of Audubon of Florida

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