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Glades Deal Can Save Our Coasts

By [FRANK SARGEANT](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Published: June 25, 2008

The deal announced Tuesday by Gov. Charlie Crist for the state to buy 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land south of Lake Okeechobee and put it back into natural marsh is epic both in the size of the parcel and the impact it will have on the environment in South Florida.

Agriculture - not only the sugar companies, but also cattle ranches and citrus - largely transformed the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers into open sewers for the runoff from vast acreage of flat country around the lake, most of which was wetlands before the draglines arrived.

By draining the marsh country - at the time thought of as transforming waste land to useful, productive acreage - the corporate farmers cut off the natural flow of water out of the lake and into the sprawling wetlands that stretched south to what is now Everglades National Park.

What had been the natural kidney of the enormous ecosystem was eliminated. The two rivers, the St. Lucie running to the east coast and exiting at Stuart and the Caloosahatchee running to the west coast and exiting at San Carlos Bay, became drains not only for the natural rainfall coming down the Kissimmee Valley, but also for all the agricultural runoff from all those areas.

The St. Lucie was the first to show the impact. For decades, yellow, foaming water has poured through the locks and rushed into the estuaries of the lower Indian River, one of the state's premier snook fisheries. Gradually, the Indian River Lagoon, once clear and carpeted with grass, became a cloudy, algae-ridden morass for miles on either side of the outflow. Fish by the thousands developed lesions brought on by the bacterial stew. And the fishing, though still good, is a shadow of what it was.

The Caloosahatchee, a larger flow, seemed somewhat immune to the impact of the poor water quality until the last 10 years or so, when it began to develop horrendous algae blooms. It is now a filthy open sewer many months of the year, and the water pours into the estuary at San Carlos Bay, fouling the water for miles. The Caloosahatchee is important not only as a snook and tarpon fishery, but it also has one of the few known sawfish hatchery areas in its lower reaches.

Opening up the marshes south of the lake would allow some of this bad water to be diverted into the sheet flow south toward the Everglades. And as it eased through miles of sawgrass marshes and lily pad holes, the water would be filtered and cleaned. By the time it reached the tributary creeks of Florida Bay, it would again be clean, fresh water - just what the brackish fisheries of the upper Everglades need to thrive.

Tarpon, snook and redfish all depend on a mix of clean fresh water and saltwater in the early

stages of their life cycle, as do hundreds of other organisms. This project should bring the vast "River of Grass" back to a condition it has not approached in 80 years.

Along the way, it would create tens of thousands of acres of live wetlands, where wading birds, waterfowl, snail kites, gators and bass will thrive.


Just as importantly, the vast water storage areas available would put an end to the need for "backpumping" from farmlands into Lake Okeechobee, a horrible process environmentally because it put millions of gallons of water laced with fertilizer, pesticides and suspended muck into the big lake, decimating the once magnificent sport fishing for bass and panfish.

It is a project so big, covering almost 300 square miles, that most environmental groups did not even have it on their wish list. It was an impossible dream, but it appears about to come true thanks to a governor who appears to be truly "green" despite drawing fire from some for his recent stance on Gulf oil drilling, and to key legislators, the South Florida Water Management District and the cooperating U.S. Sugar Company.

ODDS AND ENDS: Tampa Tribune correspondent Randy Rochelle presents a free seminar on fishing offshore for grouper and snapper at Golden Triangle Fishing Club, meeting tonight at 7 at Bill Currie Ford, 5815 N. Dale Mabry Highway, Tampa; (813) 935-3293. ... Tightlines Tackle presents a free offshore trolling and bait rigging seminar Thursday at 7 p.m. at 6924 N. Armenia Ave. in Tampa; (813) 932-4721. ... The captain's party for the Old Salt Inshore Offshore Ladies Tournament is Thursday at 7 p.m. at Madeira Beach Marina, Municipal Drive, Madeira Beach, 7 p.m. Fishing is Saturday, entry \$75; www.OldSaltFishing.org.

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