sfwmd.gov

Compiled by: South Florida Water Management District
(for internal use only)

Total Clips: 2

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Crist loses his bearings	06/06/2009	St. Petersburg Times	Tim Nickens
Lost in the Saw Grass	06/05/2009	Miami New Times	

Crist loses his bearings

Return to Top

06/06/2009
St. Petersburg Times
Tim Nickens

By Tim Nickens, Editor of Editorials
In Print: Sunday, June 7, 2009

Gov. Charlie Crist's political radar went haywire last week when he decided to become the governor who killed growth management in Florida.

Usually, what Crist lacks in public policy smarts is offset by good manners and astute political calculations. He sensed the winds were shifting in Florida and declined to appear with President George W. Bush the day before his 2006 election victory. He hasn't solved the property insurance crisis, but he gets points for bashing big insurers because Floridians are fed up with high premiums. He appeared with President Barack Obama in February and embraced the federal stimulus package even as other Republican governors fumed, because he knew parents would revolt if their kids' teachers were laid off.

But the governor's political instincts failed him last week when he signed into law a bill that guts growth management and sets this state back decades. Judging from letters to the editor and political blogs, it's not just environmental groups and local governments that are appalled. More than a few Republican voters aren't happy with Crist, either.

How did Gov. Gridlock, as our editorial aptly labeled him, reach such an appallingly bad decision that is at odds with so much of his record? It seems inconceivable that the governor who is determined to help save the Everglades by buying land from U.S. Sugar would want to pave over much of the rest of the state.

I've got a few hunches about this sudden case of tone-deafness.

First, the intricacies of growth management are complicated. Urban service areas, transportation concurrency and Development of Regional Impact are catch phrases for county planners and land-use lawyers. The governor may have figured that the details are for wonks and he could smooth it over with talk of stimulating the economy.

Floridians are smarter than that. They know when they are stuck in traffic because the road is lined with strip malls. Want to bet what an opinion poll would say about whether voters believe developers should pay for road projects to accommodate the traffic their projects create?

Crist just let most of those developers off the hook.

Voters also may not closely follow the DRI process for large-scale developments. But they recognize when those massive projects create more demand for local government services, more traffic and more environmental concerns. The governor just wiped away the mandatory DRI process and left local governments to largely fend for themselves.

The economic development argument does not wash, either. With more than 300,000 housing units vacant and empty storefronts in every city, most people understand that the economic recession was not triggered by growth management laws. It was too much development, not too little, that exacerbated the recession.

Second, Crist is too cozy with the Realtors, the developers and the Florida Chamber of Commerce. They exert too much control in Tallahassee, masquerading as the voices of regular folks back home. In fact, they are special interests looking out for themselves. They were among the most ardent supporters of Amendment 1, which further fouled up the property tax system. They helped Crist sell voters on the constitutional amendment by claiming it would turn around the real estate market. They were dead wrong, and now we're stuck with a system that is even more unfair.

Now those same interests helped push this growth management travesty through the Legislature and convince Crist it is the answer. Once again, they claim to be jump-starting the economy. And once again, they will be wrong and Floridians will be worse off. By the time that becomes apparent, though, Crist will have cashed the checks for his U.S. Senate campaign.

Third, there is something that does not smell right about the Crist administration's approach to this growth management bill. The secretary of Community Affairs, growth management expert Tom Pelham, worked on this issue forever. He came to the Times editorial board months ago, acknowledged the problems with transportation concurrency and the DRI process, and was working on solutions. During the legislative session, he drew the ire of legislators by publicly airing some of his concerns about the direction they were headed.

With two weeks left in the legislative session, it looked as though the bill would die, or if it passed Crist could be counted on to veto it. Instead, it passed on the last day of the session and he signed it. The fact that it appears the governor sold out his hand-picked growth management expert has not been lost on the secretaries of some of the governor's other departments.

There are a couple of theories. One is that the governor's executive staff, which is not the strongest or the most seasoned, went around Pelham and cut a deal with legislators. That would not be the first time that happened in Tallahassee.

Another theory is that Pelham was more interested in self-preservation than in preserving Florida. He did not publicly call for Crist to veto the bill, and he has not said what advice he privately gave the governor. There is no love for Pelham or his agency in the Legislature, and you can bet if the bill had been vetoed there would have been another effort to abolish the agency next year. So now the agency may have been saved but the law it helps enforce is gutted.

I don't buy the second theory. Pelham has too much of his career invested in growth management to be that self-serving. Publicly calling for a veto would have been suicide. And Crist already was telling reporters the bill looked good before Pelham even met with him to discuss the details.

That's inside baseball. The bottom line is the damage is done. The developers win, Floridians lose and Crist is a terrible disappointment even to many of his supporters.

Lost in the Saw Grass

06/05/2009
Miami New Times

Return to Top

A clump of iron wires dangles from a boat in the cool brown canal. On this breezy April morning, a few hundred volts crackle through the metal strands into the water.

Barron Moody sweeps a net through the murk and pulls up six bass. The stunned fish shimmy side to side in slow confusion, their wet scales refracting yellow and blue in the sun. Moody tosses them into a half-full holding pool and grins.

"It's unbelievable, right?" Moody asks.

Moody is a biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and it's his job to keep an eye on the birds, alligators, and bass that live here in the Everglades.

In a few hours, Moody will count up the fish in his boat. A few years ago, his colleagues found 8,000 fish in one stretch of this 26-mile canal just north of the Tamiami Trail. Fishermen were hooking almost two bass every hour, pretty much negating the old joke "that's why they call it fishing and not catching."

You might not know it by its name, but the L-67A canal, just 30 miles west of downtown Miami, is one of the best fishing holes on planet Earth. Every weekend, anglers from as far away as North Carolina and New Mexico haul their boats here to float over the cattail-choked culverts and reel in the big bass.

But it might not survive the next generation. If Everglades restoration projects go forward as planned, this canal will be backfilled with dirt.

"It's a shame," says Rick Persson, a retired Miami Beach firefighter leaning on the wheel of his sleek boat. He smiles at Moody's bounty of fish. "Kids now won't be able to enjoy this when they're my age."

Persson has fished the L-67A for more than 30 years. The Miami native used to hop in a pickup with his dad every weekend, hitch up a rusty old sloop, and drive home nine hours later sunburned and stocked with bass dinners for the week.

"When I came out here in the '70s with a johnboat and a 10-horsepower motor, the canals were totally clear," says the 69-year-old Persson. "No one had quite caught on to how good the fishing was."

Now that he's retired, Persson travels the country to fish in big-money tournaments. Whenever he's home, he drags his new yellow and black Skeeter bass boat to the waters where he caught the fishing bug. And most days, he ends up with a better haul than at all the more famous lakes and rivers he visits on the road.

With all the news about the billion-dollar Everglades restoration plan, you don't hear much from people like Persson, who think the project as it stands might actually do more harm than good.

Folks like Persson don't dispute that the Everglades needs saving. One hundred years of men digging ditches, poaching gators, and paving suburbs farther and farther into the swampland has left one of America's most important ecosystems in peril.

Everglades restoration has suddenly become a national priority under President Obama. Just last week, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar rode an airboat through the swamp and bragged about $200 million in new federal funding.

But as environmentalists absorb the biggest infusion of cash in a decade from the federal government, Persson and like-minded activists around the Glades are raising some inconvenient concerns. They question whether the new purchase will accomplish anything and worry about the jobs it will cost in the poor towns around Lake Okeechobee. That's why I've hitched a ride on his boat this afternoon and why, over the next several weeks, I will travel hundreds of miles to visit others who could lose out on Glades restoration in places such as Okeelanta, Pahokee, and South Bay.

Their fight over the future of the Glades is the latest in a centuries-old struggle between man and nature, a battle that was seemingly won a hundred years ago, before we realized the cost of our

victory.

Now, as we backpedal and try to undo what we've done to the River of Grass, it's worth asking how far we intend to go. Will we ever return the land to the way it was 300 years ago? Would we really want to?

For Persson and others like him, the answer is no. There's room, they say, for man and nature in the Everglades.

Okeelanta

The directions are easy.

"Drive north until you see something," the Florida Crystals rep says. "Then turn left."

Cruising up U.S. 27, the 50-mile ribbon of asphalt bisecting the Everglades between Alligator Alley and Lake Okeechobee, I see what he means.

There's nothing out here. Flat acres of saw grass and dry brown shrubs stretch to the sky on either side. There are no billboards. And no signs for gas stations or rest stops, because there aren't any.

It's easy to see why this desolate landscape tempted the first white settlers who ventured into South Florida. It looks like a useless swamp. And the urge to turn nothing into something is powerful, especially in America.

In its natural state, the Everglades was actually more a massive, molasses-slow river than a swamp. All the water in the Kissimmee Valley poured into Lake Okeechobee. From the vast shallow pool, water seeped south across millions of acres of muck. The land was just a few inches above sea level, high enough for water to creep toward Florida Bay a few feet a day.

The solution for how to fix this mess of a wasteland seemed easy: Dam up Lake Okeechobee so it would quit overflowing, and build canals to shunt its waters west and east to the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

There's a long list of famous men who went broke or died trying to make this "easy solution" work. Hamilton Disston, heir to a saw-making fortune, dredged the first ditches in the late 1800s before he lost thousands of dollars and died of a heart attack before reaping any real profit. Henry Flagler, oil magnate and father of South Florida, ultimately declared even his massive fortune was insufficient to battle the Glades. And Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, the fiery, floppy-mustached governor, had gallstones that killed him before his dream was realized.

"Yes, the Everglades is a swamp. So was Chicago 60 years ago," Broward once said, laying out all the American hubris toward the Glades.

They all failed. But Americans are persistent. Eventually, the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the lake, dredged miles of channels, and reclaimed hundreds of thousands of acres of swampland.

Eventually the plan succeeded — but it came at cost, including killer fires, dust bowls, and saltwater-infested groundwater from Boca to Miami.

However, one industry benefited tremendously from man's victory over the Everglades: Big Sugar.

Florida's sugar industry has thrived thanks to the millions of dollars poured into drying out the swamp south of Lake Okeechobee. Once the Corps figured out how to keep the land wet and fertile enough, the thousands of acres known as the "Everglades Agricultural Area" became America's sugar breadbasket.

Have a cappuccino this morning? Some yogurt or granola for breakfast? Chewing on some gum? Pretty much anything sweet in your diet probably includes sugar cane grown here in the heart of the Everglades by U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals, or a smaller co-op.

For anyone who cares about Glades restoration — or anyone interested in where people fit into the

future of the River of Grass — the sugar companies are key. In fact, Tom Van Lent, chief scientist for the Everglades Foundation, says, "We're all at the mercy of the sugar growers."

Why? Because if the Everglades is ever to return anything close to its original flow, clean water will have to course south through these flatlands bristling with sugar cane.

After almost 50 miles, I finally see something. A 20-story smokestack shimmers in the heat to the east. I turn left past the Florida Crystals/Domino sign and meet Gaston Cantens, a slick politician with wide, watery brown eyes. Cantens spent a decade representing Miami in the Florida House. Since he left politics in 2006, he's been shilling for Florida Crystals, a giant that churns out 4 million tons of sugar a year.

To show me why the company so highly values its land here in Okeelanta, Cantens guides me by the arm through the company's complex.

The sheer size is amazing. Florida Crystals has more than 150,000 acres, its own road system, and its own power plant that burns waste from the sugar harvest. There's a 185,000-square-foot warehouse manned by sleek robots that fill and stack sacks of cane so quickly they're difficult to follow, and two mills and a refinery just as large.

Cantens mentions the company's efforts to grow more organic sugar. He talks about the millions spent cleaning the farm's runoff, and all the energy produced by the sugar cane-burning power plant (enough to power 20,000 homes).

As he drones on with a friendly smile, I almost forget all the terrible things Florida Crystals have done over the years.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, dozens of former employees brought suit against the company, accusing it of abusing the poor laborers imported every year from the West Indies to hack down the cane crop. In the most famous case, the company settled with hundreds of workers it deported in 1986 after an impromptu strike.

In those same decades, Florida Crystals and its competitor U.S. Sugar flooded the Everglades with incredible amounts of pollution. Florida Crystals' owners — the Fanjul family, the richest Cuban-Americans alive — are notorious for their wide-reaching political influence, from the Clinton White House to every administration in Tallahassee. Patriarch Alfy Fanjul once interrupted Bill Clinton as he tried to break off his relationship with Monica Lewinsky and harangued him on the phone for 22 minutes about Al Gore's proposed sugar tax to fund restoration projects. Kenneth Starr detailed the call in his report on Clinton's scandal.

So it's not surprising that Florida Crystals is usually cast as the heavy in restoration stories. It's no different with the latest great hope for the Everglades, a plan so ambitious that Gov. Charlie Crist essentially threw $8 billion and a decade's worth of projects out the window to make it happen.

Until last summer, the Everglades' salvation depended on a plan drafted by Bill Clinton in 1996 and ceremonially signed into law four years later. The plan had three key steps: Dams and ditches would be removed, restoring some natural flow. Lake Okeechobee would be cleaned. And enormous reservoirs would be built to hold the lake's runoff in the summer and pour water south in the dry months.

By last year, the dream had all but fizzled. The Army Corps had completed exactly zero of the draft's 68 projects. The cost has soared from $7.8 billion to $10.9 billion, according to a report to Congress by the National Research Council. The largest planned reservoir — an arena-size rock pit right alongside U.S. 27 — is half-done, surrounded by huge piles of debris.

So last June, Crist put all the projects on hold and announced a bold new alternative. He'd been secretly negotiating with Florida Crystals' big rival next door, U.S. Sugar. The company agreed to sell the state 187,000 acres for $1.7 billion. Last month, all the parties involved agreed on a final sale, which the staggering economy scaled down by half.

The deal has been hailed nationally as a fresh new hope for the Everglades after another decade of failure. "It's a tremendous sea change," says Van Lent, the Everglades Foundation scientist. "We're never going back now."

But for Cantens and his firm, the deal looks an awful lot like a corporate bailout to a competitor deeply in debt. Crist, who took thousands in donations from sugar executives in his last campaign, agreed to give U.S. Sugar an inflated $7,400 per acre of land valued last year at $4,000.

Cantens says Florida Crystals isn't about to take the same kind of deal. "The state has nothing to offer us," he says. "And can you imagine what it would do to this region if we left?"

Cantens isn't talking ecology — he's talking economy. More than 30,000 people living south of Lake Okeechobee are desperately dependent on the sugar industry for jobs. "The economy out here is just ungodly bad. There's nothing else out here but us," Cantens says.

The former politician leads me to an industrial elevator inside the company's massive power plant, which burns bagasse, the leftover biomass from the sugar cane harvest. The building smells like caramelized sugar.

On the top story, we walk to a railing and lean over. Emerald fields of cane roll to the east and west horizons like an unbroken AstroTurf rug. The land is so flat and uncluttered that the U.S. Sugar mill in Clewiston, 20 miles to the northwest, is starkly etched against the blue sky like an urban skyline.

To an early pioneer in South Florida, it would look like a dream fulfilled — miles of rich agriculture instead of useless swamp. To a modern ecologist, it looks like a nightmare of pollution, destroyed ecosystems, and abuse.

Either way, it's not likely to change anytime soon.

"This is our company. This is Florida Crystals," Cantens says, sweeping his hands across the land toward the small towns a few miles north, clustered around Lake Okeechobee. "We're not going anywhere. These towns are depending on that."

Pahokee

A few days later, I head to one of those towns to meet the people who have learned to make a living in the middle of the Glades.

Eighteen miles of twisting, two-lane highway northeast of Cantens' sugar-burning plant, Pahokee sprawls over a few acres between Lake Okeechobee and U.S. 98.

In a white house facing U.S. 98, Wayne Whitaker relaxes in a wooden rocking chair. He has lived in Pahokee for 50 years, working as a homebuilder and for the past year serving as mayor of this town of 6,500.

Whitaker knows that if nature had its way, his town probably wouldn't even exist. The evidence is right in his back yard.

The Hoover Dike, a 30-foot-high mound of earth separating Pahokee from Lake Okeechobee, rises just a football's toss from Whitaker's home.

We both puff a little while hiking up the slope. Whitaker's dull orange cowboy boots slide on the dry brown grass and he windmills his arms to keep his balance.

The mayor is a 64-year-old swamp rat. His first job, as a 16-year-old, was working on a lock and a canal near the Kissimmee River. For one boiling summer, he battled mud and mosquitoes to help dig the ditches that diverted water from Lake Okeechobee and dried up the Everglades.

"How 'bout that?" Whitaker gasps, reaching the dam's summit.

Dark brown water stretches from the bottom of the hill all the way to the horizon. The wind carves tiny whitecaps around a single boat heading south, skirting a few grassy islands rising from the shallows.

That gargantuan shallow lake — outsized only by Lake Michigan in North America, but just eight feet deep in most places — can also be deadly. It's a fact etched in the history of the towns that live in its shadow, such as Pahokee and its closest neighbors, South Bay and Belle Glade.

All three burgs were founded near the turn of the 20th Century, when the first Everglades drainage canals were dug. Hundreds of Midwestern farmers bought reclaimed land on promises the land would yield massive crops. Mostly, it yielded floods and disasters, but some farmers stuck around anyway.

In 1926, only a small earthen dike separated the people from the lake when the Great Miami Hurricane tore through. The storm ripped a half-mile hole in the dam, killing 400 settlers and leaving more than 35,000 homeless.

Despite thunderous criticism from Florida newspapers and outcries from Everglades settlers, not much was done to strengthen the dam after the disaster. Towns were rebuilt; more settlers moved in. And in 1928, an even larger hurricane destroyed Boca Raton and then swept over the lake.

This time, more than 21 miles of the dike burst. Entire families drowned together. Only one building was left standing in Belle Glade. And more than 2,500 people died, mostly poor black laborers in low-lying lands.

Nature, yet again, brushed aside man's attempts to tame it. Less hardy settlers would surely have packed up and left.

Instead, after the bodies were burned in bonfires around Pahokee (the land was still too wet for mass cemeteries), the Army Corps of Engineers built the Hoover Dike. It is 30 feet high and 142 miles long. It has kept Pahokee and her sister cities safe — even during Hurricane Wilma, when Whitaker watched water whip halfway up the side.

But as with most of man's victories over the Everglades, the success has come with a harsh cost. The dike has helped parch the life out of the Glades, damming water from its natural course south from the lake over the thousands of acres covered by sugar cane.

The best thing for the Everglades, many scientists believe, would be to knock down the dike and let the water rip. Whitaker and his 30,000 neighbors, alas, aren't going away. As much as anybody, Whitaker has seen what happens when Pahokee loses sugar jobs — and he's as worried as anyone about what the future of Everglades restoration holds for his people.

"I enjoy living here. For a lot of us, this is home and we'd never leave," Whitaker says, staring out at the dark, shallow water.

That's why so many people in Pahokee panicked when Crist announced his U.S. Sugar deal.

Even though Crist planned to buy 187,000 acres around their town and would have put 1,700 people out of work, no one from Pahokee or any of the surrounding Glades villages was invited to the table — or even warned that negotiations where under way.

Whitaker's counterpart in Belle Glade, Steve Wilson, compared U.S. Sugar to a scorpion stinging the trusting town in the back.

"It's gonna hurt us real bad," Whitaker said at the time.

He still isn't sure where his neighbors will work if not in the sugar industry.

Environmentalists say "tourism" jobs will come with restoration. The executive director of the South Florida Water Management District reassured town residents after the announcement that she had "already approached the Office of Tourism" to talk about the town's plight. Whitaker simply laughs at that idea.

"Let me tell you about tourists," he says, walking back down the dike toward his home. "Tourists want entertainment. There's a lot of bird watchers, I guess, but they're not replacing our agriculture."

For residents of Pahokee, there's always going to be a fundamental rift with Everglades restoration. How could there not be in a town whose survival relies on the dried-out, channeled, dammed system that environmentalists want to undo?

"We have to diversify our economy, there's no doubt," Whitaker says, dropping back down into the wooden rocker on his wide front porch. He waves at a passing car, and then another.

"I think we can have a happy medium. I mean, we need jobs, we have to have agriculture. But we know we need restoration too, to keep our water supply clean."

He gestures at the towering mass of earth rising from his back yard, looming over his house like a billboard for man's victory over the lake.

"But we're sure as heck not going to just abandon Florida and put it back like it was."

South Bay

On a sticky morning last June, in a marshy field near Wellington, Linda Johnson watched Gov. Charlie Crist give a euphoric speech. She had a sick feeling in her stomach. Crist announced to a giddy crowd that the state had agreed to buy 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar fields for $1.7 billion. The land would go to Everglades restoration. Crist called the deal "as monumental as our nation's first national park."

After the speech, Johnson joined the queue of well-wishers from the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and the Everglades Foundation. When she reached Crist, she grabbed his hand, looked him in the eye, and said, "Governor, I hope you're aware that people still live out there."

That's been Johnson's message to the world since she was elected last year to her hometown's city commission. That's why she agrees to meet me in South Bay, about ten miles south of Pahokee, on U.S. 27.

On the way into South Bay, I pass a sign that says everything you need to know about the town. In front of a muddy field, wedged against a rusty fence near where U.S. 27 hits West Palm Beach Road, a piece of plywood with hand-painted black letters reads, "MUCK for sale."

There isn't much else to offer these days. I drive down a few gravel-lined side streets and can't help but think of the statistics I read that morning. More than a quarter of the town's 4,000 mostly black residents are unemployed. Almost 50 percent of the children here live below the poverty line. Per capita income is only $9,100. I pass two shotgun shacks with plywood over the windows. A young man, maybe in his late 20s, wearing a sleeveless white shirt stares at me from a driveway. He leans on a walker and slowly shuffles back toward a screen door.

It's a desolate scene in a desolate moment in America's economy. When I meet Johnson at city hall, a few blocks down the road, she admits up front she's worried about her town.

"I've never seen it this bad," Johnson says. "I used to ride through town and people were sitting on their front porches, enjoying life even if they didn't have much. You don't see that anymore." The recession has killed the few jobs the town offered outside the sugar industry.

A short, stylish woman with elaborately coiffed curls and thick-framed glasses, Johnson was raised in South Bay. She remembers the town where she grew up as a quiet Southern village where people looked out for each other. But it was also a community that never forgot the devastating hurricane of 1928. Johnson's neighbors had relatives who personally survived that flood.

When Johnson was elected to the city commission in 2008, she certainly never forgot the government once neglected her people so badly that 2,500 died. That's why she marched up to Crist to demand that he not forget South Bay in his new Everglades plans. That's why she's been busing her neighbors in matching "Save Our Jobs" T-shirts to every county board meeting she can schedule.

"We just get lost in the saw grass out here," she says. "We understand that restoration is

important, but sometimes it's stressful for us when we see more attention placed on alligators than people."

Johnson represents one of the poorest municipalities in all of South Florida — but she has a message of hope for the future of her town. As usual in these parts, it's a message that's already stirring deep opposition among environmentalists.

For the first time since she took office, Johnson is optimistic. She has a plan to bring hundreds of new jobs to South Bay. Her eyes gleam behind her glasses as she explains it.

Here's the idea: In a few years, a renovated Panama Canal will bring a new class of supersize cargo ships through the Caribbean. In South Florida, that will mean a major boost in cargo sent ashore in Miami and Fort Lauderdale.

Johnson wants to build an "inland port" right down the road — on a parcel of Florida Crystals land next to U.S. 27. Ships could unload in Miami, send the goods by truck or train to South Bay's inland port, and quickly free up docks again for more stuff.

Everglades advocates have already declared the plan a disaster in the making.

This past April, the Palm Beach County Commission met to vote on a zoning change for the port. The chamber's seats were filled with South Bay residents in their matching T-shirts, shuttled in by Johnson. Environmentalists were also there in force.

Drew Martin, a member of the Sierra Club, looked at the South Bay residents in their "Save Our Jobs" tees and said from the podium: "I feel bad for these people, I really do. But this project would put our restoration plans back by years."

Johnson quickly grabbed the podium after he finished. "We don't need pity," she scoffed. "We need jobs."

The exchange threw the conflict at the heart of Everglades battles into sharp relief. Environmentalists see the land between Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park as a key piece to put the River of Grass back the way it was. The people who live on that land see it as their home and want to earn a decent living.

Johnson says she supports restoration. But she fears that everyone living on the coasts forgets the people in the middle of the Glades. Without the inland port or U.S. Sugar, her town could be even worse off than it is today. The port could also boost the economies of Miami and Fort Lauderdale by upping the volume of cargo coming through, she says.

"I don't think the environmentalists were prepared for how strongly we all stood behind this," Johnson says. "But just the idea of having an inland port, knowing that hotels and restaurants and housing would come with it..."

Johnson trails off for a minute. "It's about survival for us. Flat-out survival."

The L-67A

A blue heron bends its curlicue neck into its breast and wades cautiously along the bank. A crocodile's nose glides through the black current. Wind rustles the saw grass.

I toss my line into the water and watch Rick Persson whistle another perfect cast into the murky shallows.

More than the sugar battles in Okeelanta, the angst over jobs in Pahokee, and the arguments over inland ports in South Bay, the war over this single placid strip of water shows the mixed-up approach we take to saving the Glades.

Persson and his fishing partner, Al Ovies, make a convincing argument that undoing our damage here doesn't have to mean divorcing ourselves from the land.

Leaning on the boat's prow, Ovies, a jovial Cuban-American with a bushy mustache and a custom-made sportfishing jacket, casts his line into a deeper pool. He and Persson met in a bass fishing club in the 1980s. They bonded in the late 1990s over their dismay about the Army Corps of Engineers' unveiled plan to backfill the L-67A canal. Both men had fished the man-made stream for decades. Both also believed the Corps' plan was rash and untested. In 2001, they formed a coalition to save the canals. They began attending South Florida Water Management District meetings and talking to Corps officials.

"When we started going to meetings, I'm convinced a lot of these guys had no idea that anyone even fished these canals," Ovies says. "They thought it was just a water conveyance they could get rid of and no one would miss."

Persson, Ovies, and I float down the arrow-straight canal, the rhythmic splash of our lures the only sound other than the wind. It's hard to believe this waterway hasn't always existed. I think about the Seminole Indians who fled to these swamps in the early 1800s to avoid the Trail of Tears. They too dug canals, to keep their tree islands dry and to create fishing holes.

But these canals are different, says Van Lent, the Everglades Foundation scientist. They're deep gouges across the Everglades — 18 feet deep in places. The L-67A forces millions of gallons that used to flow gently across endless acres into a fast-moving river. Millions of fish, birds, and insects that depended on the slow-moving river for a habitat have died, and reams of invasive species have moved in instead.

"Everyone agrees the [canal] has got to go," Van Lent says with authority. "It's an artifact of what we've done to destroy the Everglades. It's certainly not a natural feature, and it's certainly not compatible with Everglades restoration."

Persson and Ovies concur that restoring the natural flow of water to Everglades National Park would be ideal. But both doubt it's possible. They worry the Corps, acting on an untested theory, will backfill one of the state's premier fishing holes.

The fishermen are not alone, it turns out. Jon Fury, a biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission since 1985, has spent more than 20 years studying the canal systems. And he's found few places that match the L-67A as a fishery. By his math, the canal generates $1.1 million for Florida businesses every six months.

Fury believes water flow to the Glades can be fixed by removing levees but leaving the canals. Water could then flow freely over the top of the man-made ditches.

"To simply backfill these canals because it's the easiest solution you see, I'd have to say hold on," Fury says. "You're going to ruin a really important fishery."

Van Lent is skeptical. "Maybe we can have an occasional hole where bass can have a refuge," he says. "But there's not going to be the same access. You're not going to be able to drive in from the city and launch your boat in 20 minutes from the dock right off the Trail."

That's a tough pill to swallow for a man such as Persson, who spent so many long, languid afternoons on the canal with his dad, who died four years ago.

The old firefighter's eyes are distant and glassy behind his sunglasses as he casts and reels, casts and reels, drifting down the same waterway he's floated along a thousand times before.

Suddenly, his arms go taught. Tendons flex under his weathered flesh as the fishing line jerks and tightens.

Persson pulls back on the rod, expertly driving the hook deeper into whatever is fighting below. He reels. A footlong bass breaks the surface, flipping back and forth as it struggles in the air.

This time, in this tiny conflict waged in a canal carved out of the swamps, man has won.

"Beautiful," he says.er to creep toward Florida Bay a few feet a day.