

FORT MYERS
FLORIDA WEEKLY
 YOUR NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT SOURCE

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GUEST OPINION

Stop sugar subsidies



Judah

BY RAY JUDAH

Commissioner, District 3

A couple of weeks ago Commissioner Bob Janes and I were unable to receive support from the majority of the Board of County Commissioners to send a letter to our Congressional delegation requesting revisions to the 2007 Farm Bill that would stop the waste of taxpayers dollars spent on subsidizing the sugar industry to the detriment of the economy and environment of south Florida.

Continuation of increased subsidies to the sugar industry is contrary to our free market economy and serves to undermine Federal and State efforts to properly manage the Lake Okeechobee Watershed and restore the Florida Everglades.

Federal price support of the sugar industry in the Everglades Agricultural Area between Lake Okeechobee and the Florida Everglades allows for the continuation of destructive land practices resulting in severe alteration to the natural hydrological systems critical to the long term sustainability of the south Florida ecosystem.

The very existence of the sugar cane industry in south Florida can be attrib-

uted to ill-advised government policies resulting in big sugar being a huge welfare recipient at the expense of the public taxpayer.

For years, U.S. government subsidies have enriched the sugar industry's profit margin. This insidious federal sugar subsidy program includes government-backed loans, price support and import quotas.

A sweetheart arrangement with the United States Department of Agriculture allows the sugar processors to pledge sugar as collateral for business loans at a rate of approximately 18 cents per pound. This favorable loan rate, which is two to three times higher than the average world sugar price, must be repaid within nine months or sugar is forfeited to the government in lieu of repaying their debt.

In order to avoid loan default and the government being stuck with the high cost of storing forfeited sugar, the loan program guarantees that the sugar processors receive a price for sugar that is no lower than the loan value. Government control of the sugar supply maintains the high price of domestic sugar putting billions of dollars into the sugar industry's coffers. The government manipulates the sugar supply by setting quotas on the amount of foreign sugar permitted to be imported without facing prohibitive tariffs and regulating the amount of sugar that domestic processors can sell.

The sugar industry is quick to point out that the price support program requires no government outlay, but the sugar industry is allowed to plunder the taxpayer due to government's role in propping up the high price of domestic sugar.

Flush with cash, the sugar industry contributes millions of dollars to politicians that support the federal sugar subsidy program and blunt reform efforts to promote world Free Trade Agreements and halting the continuing destruction of the Florida Everglades and coastal estuaries.

The U.S. Congress recently reconvened after its summer recess and will be considering reauthorization of the 2007 Farm Bill.

Given that current Federal subsidies in the Farm Bill is the fuel that feeds the sugar industry's relentless destruction of south Florida's precious natural environment, it will require action by the people to convince our Congressional delegation to amend the Farm Bill to exclude Federal price support and subsidies of sugar operations south of Lake Okeechobee.

Only then will we be able to move forward with meaningful restoration of the Florida Everglades.

— Commissioner Ray Judah represents District 3. He can be reached at 533-2223 or by email at dist3@leegov.com. ■

GUEST OPINION

Water board right to stop failed policy

BY RAE ANN WESSEL

Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation

The practice of backpumping water from the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) and backflowing canals into Lake Okeechobee is failed water policy that works against ecosystem restoration of the greater Everglades system. Claims are being made that the water backpumped from the farms and storm water areas south of the lake is cleaner than the water currently in the lake and all other sources of water to Lake Okeechobee. This is blatantly untrue.

Longtime Lake Okeechobee scientist Dr. Paul Gray compiled the following facts from the South Florida Water Management District's report on backpumped water from the last backpumping event in 2001. The report reveals the inaccuracies of these claims.

Backpumping during the last drought in 2001 dumped 1,493 tons of nitrogen into the lake, the greatest loads from any structures. The permitted level is 393 tons; therefore backpumping contributed nearly four times the permitted levels of nitrogen to the lake. In that same drought, phosphorus from the EAA averaged from 87 to 154 ppb (parts per billion) of total phosphorus. Okeechobee needs water at about 40 ppb to regain health. This means backpumping contributes water that is two to four times the phosphorus goal for the lake. Is this the clean water?

In addition, backflowed water (water that was not pumped, but flowed from downstream canals back into the low lake) contributed even more nitrogen and phosphorus into the lake: an additional 637 tons of nitrogen and 63.5 tons of phosphorus. The backflowed and backpumped water violates the dissolved oxygen standard almost all the time, contributing to dead zones in the lake where too-little oxygen is present for aquatic life.

In defending the practice of backpumping the statement has been made that "Rainfall south of the lake can be returned to the lake by these pumps, as has been done by every governor and DEP secretary during past droughts." Hmmm. Backpumping is justified because it has always been done that way? Since this practice has resulted in a dying lake and polluted estuaries — requiring what is estimated to be billions of South Florida taxpayers' money to clean out of the lake — is backpumping/flowing really good water policy?

Backpumping serves two purposes: it removes excess water from the agricultural fields in the EAA and dumps it in the lake to be stored for later use as irrigation water. With 700,000 acres of land in the EAA to alternately pump dry and irrigate, the simple question becomes why should private corporate farm operations be allowed to use a natural freshwater lake to store their polluted water? Especially since Lake Okeechobee — the second largest fresh-

water lake in the entire nation — provides drinking water for municipalities around the lake and has been a world class fishing destination and economic generator for rural communities. Would you drink or fish out of your neighborhood, roadside stormwater canal or treatment pond?

Managing Lake Okeechobee as a reservoir, instead of a living system, perpetuates the degradation of the entire greater Everglades ecosystem. It is time for the EAA to manage its own water and to provide for the storage and treatment of their stormwater on their land and stop degrading public resources.

Every system — natural and manmade — has operating limits. If we are to make a commitment to and investment in restoration we must begin with the limits of the natural system and not make public policy decisions based on political compromises. We are clever enough to find solutions to the current problems but this will require focusing on possibilities instead of obstacles. We must change our water policy and practices today if we hope to see real ecosystem restoration. We applaud the governing board for their stand against backpumping and encourage them to not allow trading or movement of polluted water between water bodies or watersheds.

— Rae Ann Wessel is the Natural Resource Policy Director for the Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation. ■

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