

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
SELF-INTEREST PUSHES BIG SUGAR OBJECTS TO EVERGLADES FLOW-WAY

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After a recent meeting of the 10 County Coalition about Lake Okeechobee management and Everglades restoration, U.S. Sugar Corp.'s Robert Coker made comments to the media alleging fault with a proposed flow-way connecting Lake Okeechobee with the Everglades.

Mr. Coker attempted to distort the action taken on a resolution by the coalition. He ignored the fact that the resolution supported further investigation of storage and conveyance of excessive water released from Lake Okeechobee and broadened the analysis beyond a single specific flow-way in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

The Army Corp of Engineers and South Florida Water Management District are struggling with this dilemma: the Central Southern Florida Flood Control restudy — used as the basis for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP) — is defective due to faulty data used in the district's computer model to manage water in Lake Okeechobee.

The district model used rainfall data from 1965 to 1995, which historically was a dry cycle in Florida. Cyclical rainfall patterns, depicting wetter rainfall events prior to 1965 and after 1995, were not taken into account resulting in inadequate storage in CERP, thus failing to address maximum flows from Lake Okeechobee.

In the absence of adequate storage south of Lake Okeechobee, the district releases billions of gallons of water during wet years to the east and west coast resulting in destruction of coastal estuaries and significant loss of water supplies from South Florida, which is now experiencing severe drought conditions.

An evaluation of the water budget for Lake Okeechobee including inflow, rainfall, and evaporation reveals a need for an additional one million acre feet of storage during the wet season in excess of the 800,000 acre feet of water storage in the reservoirs under CERP.

The contingency plan by the district to store the excess water in aquifer storage and recovery wells is fraught with economic and environmental concerns.

A proposal of 330 wells around the lake would cost in excess of \$3 billion and the uncertainty of injecting water below ground raises serious questions as to the recovery rate and release of arsenic contaminating ground water supplies.

For the record, it is the dairy farms north of the lake and decades of back pumping from the sugar cane fields south of the Lake that have made the water dirty in Lake Okeechobee.

Fertilizers and pesticides back pumped into Lake Okeechobee have degraded water quality forcing the glades communities to shift from lake water to expensive treatment of ground water for potable water supply.

Approximately 430,000 acres of sugar cane fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades displaced an expansive natural wetland system that historically treated and stored surface water flowing south from Lake Okeechobee.

The sugar industry uses hundreds of thousands of acres of publicly owned land known as storm water treatment and storm water conservation areas to treat and store water from their sugar cane fields, thus depriving the use of these publicly owned lands for treatment and storage of excessive surface water runoff from Lake Okeechobee.

This insidious system of allowing the sugar industry to exploit publicly owned land — to the detriment of the economy and environment of South Florida and the exclusion of the entire Everglades Agricultural Area from being incorporated in a comprehensive management system to restore Lake Okeechobee and the Florida Everglades — is a recipe for destruction of our South Florida ecosystem and further deterioration of our economy and quality of life.

Restoration of a storage flow-way south of Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades Agricultural Area, whether in the form of a continuous shallow water conveyance, or interconnecting reservoirs and storm water treatment areas would be the most cost effective and efficient means of providing treatment and storage of water release from Lake Okeechobee.