

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
COKER REBUTTAL (2)

1-29-07

Mr. Robert Coker, Vice President of U.S. Sugar Corporation once again attempted to attack my integrity in his recent guest opinion involving Lake Okeechobee water quality and the impact of excessive water release to the coastal estuaries.

Since Mr. Coker cancelled a scheduled talk show program to be aired by WGCU allowing both of us to discuss the issue of Lake Okeechobee and the degradation of our coastal estuaries, I offer the following response as to the disruptive impact of four hundred and thirty thousand acres of sugar cane fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) separating Lake Okeechobee from the Florida Everglades.

Historically, water would overflow the banks of Lake Okeechobee during the summer wet season and flow south to the Everglades and Florida Bay.

The natural hydrological system was severely altered when a massive engineering project in the late 1880's connected Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee River, redirecting flow to the west, and the construction of the St. Lucie canal in the 1920's directed water from the lake to the east coast estuaries.

The Central South Florida Flood Control project in the 1940's facilitated drainage of land south of the Lake by intercepting normal sheet flow to the south and redirecting the water to the east coast via a series of drainage canals.

So while the historical water release from Lake Okeechobee flowed south to the Everglades, massive drainage projects and the encroachment of sugar cane fields on former swamplands in the heart of the wetland flow-way between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, resulted in a catastrophic change to the quality and quantity of freshwater conveyance in south Florida.

Today, the annual average fresh water flow from Lake Okeechobee is severely out of balance with approximately 50% to the west, 30% to the east and 20% to the south.

For decades the sugar cane growers back pumped water heavily laden with phosphorus and nitrogen into Lake Okeechobee. The South Florida Water Management District allowed this practice

to occur and only recently did a U.S. District Judge rule that the U.S. Clean Water Act requires the State to obtain permits before pumping water from sugar cane fields into Lake Okeechobee. Such permits would require that the water be treated prior to discharges into the Lake.

Nutrients that have accumulated in the Lake over the years flow to our coastal estuaries resulting in massive fish kills, red tide outbreaks and algae blooms.

The Glades communities are also feeling the pain of contaminated water released into the Lake due to the decline in commercial and recreational fishing and the expense of switching from lake water to underground aquifer for potable water supply.

Furthermore the current \$10.5 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP) does not adequately address maximum flow release from Lake Okeechobee due to insufficient storage, and there is no hope to restore the Everglades without a storage flow-way in the EAA to ensure appropriate rate and volume of surface water flow to the south and to minimize adverse release of excessive freshwater discharge to the estuaries on the west and east coasts of south Florida.

A review of the water budget for Lake Okeechobee in terms of rainfall, inflow and evaporation requires a minimum of one million acre feet of water storage in addition to the storage capacity to be provided by the reservoirs constructed under CERP to properly handle maximum flows from the lake.

Furthermore, additional acreage in the EAA needs to be set aside as special treatment areas in order for the sugar industry to comply with the Federal Consent Decree effective December 2006, which stipulates a reduction in phosphorus release to 10 parts per billion.

The necessity for greater water storage and increased water treatment point to the importance of a storage flow-way in the EAA to begin the recovery efforts of our south Florida ecosystem and to ensure a balance between sustainable agriculture and the long term health of our environment, economy and quality of life.