

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
JUDAH REBUTTAL TO COKER

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In his most recent commentary, Mr. Robert Coker, Senior Vice-President of Public Affairs for U.S. Sugar Corporation, asks the question as to what can we do to stop the damaging excessive fresh water releases to the Caloosahatchee River and estuaries.

In a veiled attempt to obfuscate and sensationalize the issue, Mr. Coker is unable to focus on the answer that is crystal clear to the Lee County community and our sister counties and cities along the west and east coast of south Florida.

The answer is to utilize the sugarcane fields south of Lake Okeechobee for storage of excessive fresh water releases to avoid further harmful discharges to the Caloosahatchee River and coastal estuaries.

For decades the water level in Lake Okeechobee has been managed to provide optimum growing conditions for the sugarcane fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of the lake.

A very efficient irrigation and drainage system in the Everglades Agricultural Area incorporates an expansive network of pumps, pipes, drainage canals and earthen dikes to ensure adequate and timely delivery of water to the sugarcane fields. In fact, the sugarcane fields are periodically flooded to control nematodes.

While the sugarcane fields are currently in various forms of production, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has chosen to ignore section 373.439 Florida Statutes that provides the agency with broad based authority to take emergency action to prevent further harm to the health of the public and aquatic life in the coastal counties in south Florida. Instead, the SFWMD takes the position that our estuaries are resilient enough to recover from continued releases of polluted fresh water from Lake Okeechobee.

However, local marine scientists are of the opinion that the destruction of marine habitat and fisheries to date will take a minimum of ten years to recover. Preliminary estimates

indicating 90% loss of clamming, 80% crabbing and elimination of baitfish have resulted in drastic reduction in commercial and recreational fishing. The spawning season for a wide variety of saltwater fish is in late winter, and without the optimum salinity gradient, due to continued excessive fresh water releases, an entire year class of fish will be lost.

The SFWMD needs to reassess water management objectives in the Everglades Agricultural Area, and since there is a direct correlation between the degradation of the Caloosahatchee estuaries and federal and state management of Lake Okeechobee that inures to the benefit of sugarcane production, the federal or state government should compensate the sugarcane growers for the use or purchase of the sugarcane fields for water storage.

Even with the proposed long term fix to enhance the quantity and quality of water in Lake Okeechobee, the SFWMD Acceler8 capital improvement program of reservoirs and special treatment areas, will provide some storage and enhance minimum flows, but have a negligible impact on maximum flows from Lake Okeechobee. In fact, in addition to the water storage capacity projected under Acceler8, the SFWMD needs an additional one million acre feet of water storage to protect coastal estuaries.

The sugarcane industry south of Lake Okeechobee is not sustainable due to their own farming practices. The area has been subsiding at various rates since it was initially converted from wetlands and sheet flow areas to sugarcane fields. Burning of the rich layer of peat or muck for several decades, and the exposure of the soil to oxidation, have resulted in significant loss of substrate. Depending upon which estimates used, parts of the area will no longer be usable for sugarcane or any deep root crop in as little as ten years.

Economic market conditions will soon lead to escalating interest in the transformation of the sugarcane fields to residential and commercial development, which would preclude future opportunities to restore historic flow to the Everglades and abate excessive fresh water discharges to coastal estuaries. Silence is consent to the destruction of our quality of life. The time to act is now!