

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH

FLOW-WAY IN EAA

6-12-06

In his recent letter to the Palm Beach Post, Mr. George H. Wedgeworth, President and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida dismissed the viability of a storage flow-way reconnecting Lake Okeechobee to the Water Conservation Areas (WCA) through the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA).

Mr. Wedgeworth's attempt to refute the concept of reestablishing a flow-way south of Lake Okeechobee as the solution to water related issues in south Florida is fraught with erroneous assumptions and a rush to judgment on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) draft EAA Project Implementation Report and Environmental Impact Statement.

In fact, the planning and documentation for the EAA project is not complete. A third draft of the report is expected to be released in the fall 2006. Not only is the planning for this project far from complete, but Lee County has submitted comments during the review period that USACOE and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) have failed to thoroughly analyze the benefits and trade-offs associated with a flow-way in the EAA. The County has stated on the record that the USACOE and SFWMD conduct a comprehensive analysis on the benefits and trade-offs associated with a flow-way project and reflect that analysis in a balanced way.

Mr. Wedgeworth highlights a number of factors such as soil subsidence, evapotranspiration, seepage and vegetation management, timing of flows and lack of flow events and infrastructure as reasons why a flow-way won't work in the EAA.

Elevation in the southern portion of the EAA is indeed lower than the WCA due to decades of burning and over drainage of the sugar cane fields in the EAA.

The low lying areas in the EAA caused by subsidence of the substrate would be ideal as storage reservoirs in a flow-way that would function in the same manner as the chain of lakes in the Kissimmee River Basin. Furthermore, any pooling of water in the absence of gravitational

flow to the south can be pumped to the WCA's in the same manner that pumps redistribute water for agriculture in the EAA today.

Potential seepage from a flow-way in the EAA can be managed in a variety of different ways including the use of seepage cut off walls and seepage canals to avoid damage to the agricultural fields.

A storage flow-way in the EAA would be subject to the dry and wet seasons and adjust to the timing of flows and lack of flow events like any other natural system.

While evapotranspiration may be greater with increased storage in the EAA, the replacement of a portion of the sugar cane fields with a storage flow-way would greatly reduce the amount of drainage in the EAA and increase water availability for the Everglades. Furthermore, a meandering flow-way with wetland vegetation would effectively stabilize the rate of surface water flow to the south and greatly enhance the quality of water in the Everglades. This would also reduce harmful discharge to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers. The flow-way would function as storm water treatment area improving the water quality of the region.

The infrastructure in the EAA such as pumps, pipes and water conveyance network used in sugar cane production today could work just as effectively in support of a storage flow-way that would provide a desperately needed hydrological connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Furthermore, the recent public safety concern over the integrity of the Herbert Hoover dike around Lake Okeechobee necessitates a spillway to the south that could release water to a storage flow-way in the EAA, thereby reducing high lake level stress on the dike.

Prior to the establishment of the EAA and encroachment of the sugar cane fields south of Lake Okeechobee, the river of grass that once connected the lake to the Everglades supported a fully functional and viable ecosystem in South Florida.

We must move beyond this turf war with the sugar industry and re-establish a flow-way in the EAA to protect the environmental health and economic welfare of the State of Florida.