

GUEST OPINION BY COMMISSIONER RAY JUDAH
SUGAR OR ESTUARIES?

11-17-05

Mr. Robert Coker's recent guest commentary concerning sugarcane fields and his vitriolic personal attack on my integrity failed to shed light on the direct correlation between the degradation of the Caloosahatchee River, our coastal estuaries and the sugar company's control of water management operations of Lake Okeechobee.

As Senior Vice-President of public affairs for U.S. Sugar Corporation, Mr. Coker is sadly mistaken to allege that my comments concerning the flooding of the sugarcane fields is political grandstanding, when in reality it is counties and cities from coast to coast in south Florida that are finally standing their ground.

Prior to Hurricane Wilma, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) was pursuing permitting with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACOE) to lower the water elevation in Lake Okeechobee from approximately 15.5 feet to 12 feet. For decades, the water level in the lake has been managed exclusively for flood control and water supply, to the detriment of the ecosystems of the lake and coastal estuaries. Lake water level has been held artificially high to meet the irrigation needs of the sugarcane fields.

Due to Federal law suits and warnings from the scientific community, the SFWMD and the USACOE recognized the need to change the water supply and environmental protocol for lake water management and lower the water level to restore wetlands and aquatic habitat in Lake Okeechobee, and abate excessive fresh water flows that have proven to be so damaging to our estuaries.

The recession drawdown plan to lower the lake water level was to occur over an extended time period of approximately six months to minimize further damage to our estuaries. Unfortunately, the heavy rains associated with Wilma raised the water level in Lake Okeechobee above 17 feet and the SFWMD decided to delay the recession drawdown plan and to exceed

optimum flows of 500 to 2,800 cubic feet per second (cfs) by directly discharging lake level release of 6500 cfs or greater to the estuaries on the west and east coasts of Florida.

The SFWMD has shown an alarming trend during the past several years of discharging excessive fresh water flows of polluted water laden with high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus from agricultural operations to the estuaries on the west and east coasts of Florida in lieu of directing lake water release along the historical flow way to the south.

Such practices have caused tremendous harm and destruction to our sea grass beds and marine fisheries, exacerbated red tide blooms resulting in massive fish kills, jeopardized our national wildlife refuges and aquatic preserves, and caused public health concerns in the form of toxic blue green algae in the Caloosahatchee River and residential canals.

Flying over the Lake Okeechobee Watershed on November 4th, I was able to confirm that several hundred thousand acres of sugarcane fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee were not only dry, but under various stages of production.

Given the current circumstances, it would be far less costly from an environmental and economic standpoint to compensate the sugarcane growers to utilize the sugarcane fields for water storage than to continue harmful discharges to the Caloosahatchee River and coastal estuaries. The latest price tag to restore the Everglades is now in excess of \$10.5 billion. There would be no such flooding of any communities in south central Florida as alleged by Mr. Coker.

South Florida is on the verge of an ecological collapse and our quality of life that sustains a vibrant real estate and tourism market will continue to erode with far reaching catastrophic consequences to the health of our community and economic well being if the sugarcane owners maintain their position of defiance and refuse to be a partner in providing a meaningful solution to responsible management of Lake Okeechobee and the coastal estuaries.