Editorial: Water managers in South Florida starting to get priorities straight, but what about those charged with preserving the St. Johns River?

By TCPalm Staff

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June 2008.

Years from now, historians may look back upon the month recently concluded as the pivotal moment in the preservation and restoration of the Everglades.

Gov. Charlie Crist rocked the environmental world in late June when he announced a tentative deal with U.S. Sugar to purchase 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee.

The deal, at a potential cost of $1.75 billion, has rekindled hopes of re-establishing the natural flow of water from Lake O to the River of Grass — a process everyone agrees is vital to restoring the Everglades.

The state's deal with U.S. Sugar has garnered much of the attention — and rightfully so. However, another event — less publicized but highly important — also occurred in June that bodes extremely well for Everglades restoration. Moreover, it provides keen insight into the new thinking required to preserve and reinvigorate the state's fragile ecosystem.

 Shortly before the deal was announced with U.S. Sugar, the South Florida Water Management District launched a new initiative: to reserve water for environmental needs — in particular, for fish and wildlife in the Kissimmee River north of Lake O.

Because water in the Kissimmee flows into the lake — and then is distributed throughout the region for a variety of uses — the district's decision has significant implications for all of South Florida.

District officials have taken the precedent-setting step of establishing guidelines governing the allocation of water in the Kissimmee. As Chip Merriam, deputy executive director of water resources for SFWMD, wrote in a memo to board members:

"The district ... is identifying river water for consumptive use and water for the protection of fish and wildlife. The water identified for the natural system may be protected through a water reservation as contemplated and authorized under state law."

What does this mean? The river's environmental needs may soon take precedence over agricultural and developmental needs. Additionally, the latter groups would be allowed to tap into this source only after the natural ecosystem has received an adequate supply of water.

This is a groundbreaking approach to water management. But this is how it should be.

Contrast this important policy change with the approach by the St. Johns River Water Management District — which has allowed water-intensive developments to imperil the St. Johns River — and you begin to grasp the far-reaching implications for the environment.

South Florida water managers are to be applauded for moving boldly in this direction. St. Johns managers need to get on board.

Stricter water-reservation rules are needed — in water districts throughout the state — to ensure this valuable resource is used first for environmental needs.
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