Gaston Cantens

U.S. Sugar deal is bad for the Everglades

08/18/2009 Tallahassee Democrat -- Online

Subject U.S. Sugar land purchase to a referendum

08/18/2009 Palm Beach Post George H. Wedgworth

EDITORIAL Back on Everglades track

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Lake Okeechobee rebounds nicely from years of drought, hurricanes

08/17/2009 Jupiter Courier

Gaston Cantens

My View

August 18, 2009

Re: "South Florida needs the Everglades deal" (My View, Aug. 12).

Most Floridians are unaware of what a dicey and dramatic departure the U.S. Sugar land purchase is from the science-based policies and restoration programs we had been pursuing in the Everglades. The government's purchase of U.S. Sugar's lands near Lake Okeechobee creates a hazy, undetailed new course of action, or lack thereof, for restoration of the Everglades.

As the first Everglades Agricultural Area farmer to sign off on the historic Everglades Settlement Agreement nearly 15 years ago, Florida Crystals has wholeheartedly supported restoration; we recognize it is crucial to the long-term survival of South Florida's sustainable agriculture.

As an advocate for the construction of Everglades projects, we feel compelled to draw attention to the gross misuse of more than $500 million of public funds by the water management district and underscore what a departure this is from the Everglades restoration plan the state and federal governments and all other interested stakeholders, including farmers, have been working toward for more than a decade. The proposed U.S. Sugar deal is a roadblock to the construction of projects that would have meaningful restoration results. In fact, a massive project that was under way was canceled because of this deal.

Experts associated with the effort have admitted that after, incurring the purchase debt, they will have no financial ability to do anything with the land. Water management district officials tout their "vision" of water supply and quality resulting from this purchase, but the district's executive director has admitted none of these benefits will flow naturally from the purchase. All require construction, operation and maintenance of massive public projects that the district has no ability to undertake. These projects would cost between $14 billion and $17 billion to build and $387 million to $452 million annually to operate. The district has no plan to approach paying for this. In a time of economic strife, the public will needlessly have $550 million to $650 million more to pay (after issuance costs), and U.S. Sugar will continue to farm the land it "sold." This land buy will merely cancel projects that could provide meaningful restoration.

We urge the district to go back to crafting a realistic and fiscally prudent plan that can actually be implemented and
provide real benefits like the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan from which they have deviated.

All Floridians — along with the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee — deserve to see measurable, finite progress on real restoration. Current "visions" are as fallow and inert as the land the state is buying will one day be.

Subject U.S. Sugar land purchase to a referendum
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George H. Wedgworth

The certificate of participation bond hearing to approve the South Florida Water Management District’s plan to acquire 72,300 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. is more than just a "procedure." It cuts to the heart of the Florida Constitution as to whether buying land alone constitutes a "project" and can be funded through COPs by taxpayers within the 16 counties of the district. Court approval signifies to the potential bondholders that a public purpose will be served and the certificates are solid.

In The Post, district board Chairman Eric Buermann characterized the bond challengers as a small minority of interests. If the district believes that there is widespread sentiment for this purchase, the district should use full-faith-in-credit bonds and hold a districtwide referendum. The board is an unelected body pledging taxpayer dollars for 30 years. Under the terms of the deal, it will be at least 10 years before U.S. Sugar relinquishes its leases and public-purpose projects could be built.

The district has testified in court that it would need a partner - state, local or federal government - to ever build features on the land. The district testified that the citrus acreage was offered as an “all-or-nothing” part of the deal. The district then attempted to justify what features to build on the land, most of which will be used for water-quality projects that do not qualify for federal cost sharing.

Testimony also showed that the cost of constructing water quality and storage features is estimated at between $14 billion and $18 billion, far beyond any debt load the district has statutory authority to take on. Contract terms require projects to be funded and approved before takedown of lands. This assures that nothing will be done for the foreseeable future. So where's the public benefit? The district is asking the court to approve an appointed body's vision of restoration with no assurances that it ever will be feasible to implement.

The bond hearing is an important procedure that assures that the taxpayers who are paying all $2 billion (purchase price plus interest) get something more than empty promises. We are hopeful that the court will see through this unwise undertaking, protect the taxpayers and reject the validation of COPs for the proposed purchase of land for a very questionable benefit.

GEORGE H. WEDGWORTH

Belle Glade

Editor's note: George H. Wedgworth is president and CEO of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida.

EDITORIAL Back on Everglades track
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When it comes to restoring the Everglades, an agreement on science may be only as good as an agreement on finances.

For years, Florida and the federal government had agreed on the science. They agreed to split the cost of restoring the Everglades, now estimated to be a $10.9 billion project. But they had not agreed on how to account for who pays what. Last month, the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District was shocked to learn that a pending agreement had been dynamited by "another set of eyes," required by bureaucrats in Washington.

Fortunately, head-to-head meetings over two days resolved issues that could have sunk eight years of preparation. Last week, the district and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced that they officially have worked out their differences.

The cooperation is especially timely, because for the first time in years Congress has agreed to uphold its end of the financial bargain and send money toward the Everglades. The paper differences could have delayed $41 million toward the $438 million Picayune Strand project in Collier County.

This month marks another milestone in state-federal relations: Lake Okeechobee is getting better. The corps manages the lake level, with input from the district. In recent years, it has been hard to get the level right. Too much water from the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 led to higher lake levels, damaging fishing and stressing the Herbert Hoover Dike. That resulted in a $980 million plan to strengthen the dike. Too little water during the drought of 2007-08 resulted in a record-low level, and a lake bottom so parched that arsonists were able to torch it.

Entering the peak of this year's hurricane season, the lake levels appear to be just right. One mark of improvement, as The Post's Paul Quinlan reported Sunday, is the healthier size of the winning catch in a recent bass fishing tournament. What's good for the lake could be good for the economy of the lake communities, where unemployment is as high as 42 percent in South Bay. Fishing means tourism, and tourism means jobs.

All this good, of course, can be undone by one wet hurricane. To relieve pressure on the dike if the levels rise, water managers would have to dump polluted lake water into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, harming delicate estuaries.

That's where the district's proposed $536 million purchase of U.S. Sugar land comes in. Buy that land and more water can go south, giving lake managers new options. The cooperation levels are good between federal and state water managers, but they can get better. How they incorporate the U.S. Sugar deal into existing agreements is the next test.

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**Lake Okeechobee rebounds nicely from years of drought, hurricanes**

08/17/2009

Jupiter Courier

From the deck of an airboat floating atop Lake Okeechobee, Paul Gray can see all the way to the bottom, through 5 feet of crystalline water where bass, crappie and swarms of minnows dart through a wavy lattice of lush hydrilla.

This is just gorgeous its what you hope the lake looks like, said Gray, a soft-spoken scientist from Audubon of Florida.

All too often, the states largest lake is either too full or too empty, encircled as it is by a three-story-tall dike beneath Floridas fitful, drought-or-downpour skies. High water renders the lake a choppy, murky mess. Drought can turn its shallow western fisheries into weed-choked prairies.

This may be short-lived, but Lake Okeechobee is in rare form today. It has rebounded perfectly from the 2004 hurricanes and the record-breaking, two-year drought that began in 2006.

This is the second time in 15 years its been this nice, Gray said.

In the northwestern shallows, American lotus sprout flowers as big as softballs and floppy green leaves the size of sombreros. Tiny white apple-snail eggs cluster on the green stems of needle rush and bulrush.

Dark green clumps of periphyton algae float on the glassy surface like cooked spinach, forming the base of a teeming food chain that has made the lake one of the best fishing destinations in the United States. It is also the last stop for
more than 270 species of migratory birds on their way to the Caribbean and South America.

The lakes probably in better shape than its been in 10 years, said Harlan Griggs, who manages the marine center at the Roland Martin Marina in Clewiston and took third in last weekends Xtreme Bass Fishing Series tournament.

The tournaments winner hauled in a nearly 28-pound catch almost three times as much as last Augusts champ and almost twice as much as the 17-pound win in 2007.

If you can catch 15, 16, 17 pounds of fish, youre doing good, Griggs said. But when you start catching 20 or 25 pounds of fish, thats a testament.

During a recent visit to a swath of shallow lake marsh called Indian Prairie, hundreds of birds took off at the sound of an airboat, forming the only cloud in the sky - herons, ibises, egrets, the pink-feathered spoonbills and black-necked stilts. Sandpipers scooted across a crop of water lilies.

For a couple years, this was bone dry, said Gray, stepping out of the boat to wade barefoot through the 6 inches of bathtub-temperature water.

Nearby, two small channels ran parallel into the distance tire tracks from a truck that drove out here during the drought, when arsonists, at times, set fire to what is now lake bottom.

It burned like crazy, Gray said.

Lake Okeechobee, the historic heart of the Everglades, once overflowed like a giant saucer to send broad sheets of water south into the giant marsh.

But like the rest of the Everglades, it teeters on the brink of collapse, thanks to 19th- and 20th-century efforts to open surrounding lands for farming and development.

After World War II, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers straightened the Kissimmee River, which flows from the north, and finished walling off the lake behind the 140-mile Herbert Hoover Dike. Those projects turned Lake Okeechobee, which also serves as South Floridas backup water supply, into a polluted rain barrel.

Some call the lake Central Floridas toilet bowl. But unlike a toilet, its impossible to flush. Phosphorus, an ingredient in manure and fertilizer that is the scourge of the Everglades ecosystem, now pours in from farms in huge quantities through the Kissimmee River.

So much phosphorus has accumulated that it would take centuries to eliminate it all at the current rate of removal.

Meanwhile, the same South Florida water managers in charge of cleaning the lake are consumed with another mammoth task, Gov. Charlie Crists $536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar, aimed at restoring Everglades to the south.

The greatest short-term threat to the lake is the wild fluctuation of its water levels.

After the busy hurricane season of 2004, which added 6 feet to the lake and sprung leaks in the dike, everything you see here was gone, said Gray, pointing across Codys Cove. This was just open, dirty water.

Today, a reddish water fern called an azolla graces the lakes surface like a blush.

The corps strives to keep the lakes water levels lower today than it did in years past between 12.5 and 15.5 feet above sea level with the aim of protecting the Herbert Hoover Dike and the health of the lake.

Holding water levels within that range is a lot to ask for the lake today, said Paul McCormick, the chief Lake Okeechobee scientist for the South Florida Water Management District.

Last fall, Tropical Storm Fay raised the lake 4 feet, making up more than half of the 7-foot plunge it had experienced during the 2007-08 drought.

When the lake gets too full, water stirs up sediments that block sunlight from reaching underwater vegetation, which quickly dies off. Even the shallowest parts of the lake were so murky after the 2004 hurricanes that Gray said he could not see his hand in 6 inches of water. When the lake rises, wading birds cant reach deep enough to snag fish.

Years of abnormally high water also eroded the aging dike, which now awaits $980 million in repairs that wont be coming any time soon.
Under the corps newly preferred water levels, the lake will reach about 15.5 feet in January and recede over the course of the dry season to 12.5 feet in June. That's essentially what happened in the past year.

But the rain rarely cooperates so well.

For years, it was just dirty no plants, no chance of plants, Gray said. The best news of all is that the lake is very resilient.