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### Letter: Sugar industry doing well thanks to rain

05/13/2010  
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Judy Sanchez

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Ed Killer's May 9 column, "Big Sugar, Brown Water," wasn't surprising considering his area of expertise is Treasure Coast fishing and boating rather than farming.

Weather and temperature are the most significant factors in crop production. Florida's annual sugar production was about 2 million tons prior to 2004. Since then, the multiple hurricanes of 2004-06 and the region's severe drought of 2006-2008 significantly reduced our crop size and sugar production. Although this year's crop showed a promising improvement, 2009-2010's projected 1.67 million tons of sugar is far below the industry's pre-hurricane production.

This year's sugar cane crop suffered no hurricanes and more importantly, the crop received plentiful rain. Not only did we get sufficient rainfall during the primary summer growth season, we also had a "wetter" than average dry season.

This water came from rainfall over the farming area, not from Lake Okeechobee or South Florida Water Management District-managed water supply. During the hurricane and drought years, when the system depended heavily on managed flood control and water supply, our crops fared more poorly. That would hardly happen if we truly "owned the power" over water as Killer claimed.

Freezing temperatures in the low 20s across our farms in early and mid-January impacted the sugar cane crop, but U.S. Sugar was able to react quickly due to a computerized priority harvest program our agricultural technology staff developed and our railroad systems enabled us quickly identify and transport the most damaged sugar cane to our sugar factory. At the factory, our state-of-the-art technology was able to extract far more sugar from the damaged cane stalks than in previous years. While similar temperatures in 1995 caused sugar yields to drop into the 9 percent range, our yields this crop never fell below 11 percent even in the most freeze-damaged cane. Good yields are average 11 percent to 12 percent.

Good weather and U.S. Sugar's investments in technology resulted in the 18 percent increase over last year, an improvement not seen by our South Florida sugar competitors.

As U.S. Sugar has proven a willing partner in helping provide enough land for water storage and treatment to decrease damaging dirty Lake Okeechobee releases to the coastal estuaries, we ought to try to understand each others' issues rather than continue such unfounded attacks.

Judy Sanchez

Director of Corporate Communications

U.S. Sugar Corp.

Clewiston

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### Water district, Treasure Coast residents warned of continued damage to St. Lucie estuary

05/13/2010  
Stuart News  
Treadway, Tyler

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STUART — The South Florida Water Management District Board of Governors, and Treasure Coast residents who attended the board's workshop Wednesday at the Blake Library, got the warning loud and clear:

With a much wetter-than-usual dry season ending and the wet season coming soon, expect continued damage to the St. Lucie River Estuary.

"There is going to be environmental degradation everywhere in the district," said Carol Wehle, the agency's executive director. "There are going to be some major issues coming to the board this summer."

Luis Alejandro, the Army Corps of Engineers manager of the Lake Okechobee basin, said the lake's current level of nearly 15 feet "is what we'd expect to see at the end of the wet season; and we're at the end of the dry season."

The Corps' No. 1 priority, Alejandro said, is protecting people and property by keeping the lake inside the Herbert Hoover Dike.

To lower the lake level in anticipation of summer rains, the Corps began pulse releases from Lake Okeechobee on March 27. As of May 3, the Army Corps increased the releases to an average of 1,800 cubic feet per second and announced the releases would likely continue well into the wet season.

The releases are controversial because the influx of fresh water into the brackish estuary kills plants and animals, particularly oysters, which are the basis of the estuarine habitat.

As if to say the situation could be a lot worse, Alejandro pointed out the releases are about 30 percent of the flow the Corps can legally send to the estuary.

"There are always trade-offs," said board member Shannon Estenez, who represents Broward County, "one estuary's welfare (the St. Lucie) against the other's (the Caloosahatchee River on the Florida West Coast), the lake against the two estuaries, which the people who live along the St. Lucie certainly are aware of."

Estenez said the situation "isn't going to get any better until we dramatically change the system. We're going to continue playing God until we have increased storage and water treatment (capacity). And that's what we're trying to do," an apparent reference to the district's attempt to buy U.S. Sugar Co. land to re-establish the flow of water south from Lake Okeechobee.

"Until that happens," Estenez said, "it's the ecosystems that are going to take it in the teeth."

Another warning to the board: Expect to hear from Treasure Coast residents, who see the St. Lucie estuary "take it in the teeth," at the Thursday continuation of the meeting.

People are expected to protest the Lake O discharges outside the library and address the board about the issue during a public comment period.

Water district board to discuss Lake O releases

The South Florida Water Management District Board of Governors will begin the second part of its two-day meeting at 9 a.m. Thursday at the Blake Library, 2351 Monterey Road in Stuart.

Col. Alfred Pantano, director of the Army Corps of Engineers Jacksonville District, is expected to talk about maintenance of Lake Okeechobee; and the board will hear public comment on releases from Lake O into the St. Lucie River Estuary.

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## **Editorial: Proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar land holds great promise for South Florida's aquatic ecosystem**

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TCPalm.com

The Florida Supreme Court will rule soon whether the state may proceed with its \$536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land.

There's a lot riding on the court's decision — not the least of which is our region's golden opportunity to substantially correct major environmental problems.

It would be a setback if the high court halts the land acquisition project. Why? Because we've never been so close to real, significant restoration of our aquatic ecosystem.

This is the message from Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation, and Thomas Van Lent, the foundation's senior scientist. Both men met recently with the editorial board of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers to discuss Everglades restoration and the land-acquisition project.

The take-away? If the land deal is consummated, our region could see a sizable reduction in the amount of polluted water in the St. Lucie estuary within seven years.

The 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land is a lot less than what is needed to recreate the flow-way from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay, and restore the River of Grass. To recreate the flow-way, the South Florida Water Management District would have to purchase additional land from Florida Crystals, which has complained about being shut out of the conversation.

Despite this shortcoming, the 73,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area can be used for water treatment and water storage — to the great benefit of our region.

"It resolves two major issues," Van Lent said of the additional land. "First, it resolves some of the existing water quality issues for the Loxahatchee River and back-pumping in Lake Okeechobee. Second, instead of sending water from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, it would allow for the development of a new outlet for water to the south."

The result?

"It would be possible to substantially reduce damaging, high-water flows into the St. Lucie estuary," Van Lent said.

It's hard to imagine that scenario these days. In recent weeks, the Army Corps of Engineers has been releasing more than a billion gallons of polluted water a day into the estuary.

The proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar land is far from perfect. The cost — \$536 million — will place a financial burden on the water management district and delay or terminate other restoration projects. Much more land is needed to recreate the flow-way. Also, the state should be negotiating with Florida Crystals, not just U.S. Sugar.

But, all things considered, the land acquisition project holds great promise for South Florida's aquatic ecosystem.

