

Commissioner threatens to retract Babcock Ranch support

Ray Judah says that if Florida Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson is put in charge of the ranch, he'll withdraw his support of the deal

By Charlie Whitehead
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Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah said Tuesday that the influence of agriculture dominated Lake Okeechobee policy, producing disastrous results.

If legislation installs Florida Agricultural Commissioner Charles Bronson as the "de facto czar" of Babcock Ranch, Judah said, he would withdraw his support for the complicated deal.

That deal calls for the state to buy around 74,000 of the 91,000 acres, with developer Syd Kitson building a new city on the rest. Lee County's tentatively agreed to throw more than \$40 million into the deal to buy about 5,000 acres.

"An amendment to the House bill makes the ag commissioner the de facto czar," Judah said. "To me that's a deal-killer. Ag has been the dominant force creating policy for Lake Okeechobee, and we can see what's happened there."

Judah blames agriculture-friendly lake management practices for repeated releases that have badly damaged the Caloosahatchee River and its coastal estuaries.

"If it goes forward as is, I will withdraw my support," he said.

Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers, the bill's co-sponsor, said she doesn't understand the opposition. She said the change she authorized in committee gives the Commissioner of Agriculture authority over changes the appointed management committee wants to make in the ongoing ranching operation.

"Right now, Babcock Ranch is doing very well," said Williams. "They've been doing it for over 100 years."

Williams said there's no reason to eliminate things such as sod farming and timber, cattle and tenant farming. The state is shelling out \$310 million to buy most of Babcock and wants the remainder to be a self-sufficient operation. The original deal Kitson made precluded some uses, she said.

"When we were in there fine-tuning it and I saw that, I thought we were shooting ourselves in the foot," she said.

The changes were made in the House Agriculture and Environment Appropriations Committee, of which Williams is a member. The substitute bill the committee approved unanimously will be on the House floor today.

She said the new provision gives the Commissioner of Agriculture the authority to reject changes the appointed not-for-profit management committee proposes for the agricultural operations.

"I guess I'm dumbfounded by people wanting to keep it sustainable but take away all its sustainability," Williams said. "We're buying it because it's pristine."