

Politics too big a part of Glades 'fix'

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More and more, I'm getting a queasy feeling about the Big Fix known as Everglades Restoration.

I've been reporting on the plan since 1998, when it was called the Central and South Florida Project Comprehensive Review Study, commonly referred to as the Restudy.

Back then, engineers from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District told me that the freshwater dumping out of Lake Okeechobee that was wreaking havoc and pollution on the Caloosahatchee and San Carlos Bay estuaries could be fixed with a big reservoir. When built near the Lee/Hendry County line, the reservoir would be so big it would become the seventh-largest lake in Florida.

Even so, it would not be the largest of the reservoirs on the east and west coasts that were to control the damaging releases. When built, the reservoirs would be used to capture the murky lake water and hold it until it could be shunted to farms and cities, and also down the river, but in quantities that would mimic nature.

I bought into that idea, but, unfortunately, I didn't do the math. And it looks like the Big Fix isn't going to be anywhere near big enough.

The C-43 Reservoir (C-43 is the Corps name for the canal that connects the Caloosahatchee to the lake) will hold up to 170,000 acre feet, or 55 billion gallons, of water, according to water managers touting the project.

Last year, according to numbers being quoted by environmentalists on the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie ends of the Big O discharges, about 850 billion gallons came down the pipes.

So, as Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah was quoted at last week's C-43 ceremony celebrating the success of some test cells, "It's a drop in the bucket."

That is, we're probably something like a half-trillion gallons short of containment.

It seems like the only real answer to fixing the releases, in addition to the reservoirs and maintaining Lake Okeechobee at a much lower level, is a flowway through the historic course of the Everglades. Those who have been crunching numbers say that will take about a 20 percent chunk out of the Everglades Agricultural Area — sugar-growing land with organic soil that rapidly is oxidizing into thin air, in any case.

Happily, that plan was figured out by a panel of esteemed government scientists in 1993, right down to the construction of the levees and locks that will make it work.

"Every effort," they reported, "should be taken for public acquisition of property in the EAA as various parcels are abandoned by agriculture. It is critical to long-term ecological restoration of South Florida to eventually recover or reconstitute the natural hydrologic function of the area."

Unhappily, scientists aren't the ones in charge of water management.

So far, political interests have dictated the Big Fix. But political interests can change when politicians do the math called counting votes.