

Guest columnist: Plan 6 only restoration plan worth implementing

August 30, 2006

A recent guest column article from Ms. Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, indicates a need by that organization to sell its programs to the public and justify its billion-dollar-plus taxpayer budget this year. Let's look at what the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, SFWMD and the state doesn't want you to know.

First, SFWMD is still run by a nine-member board of governors composed of members like Malcolm Wade, senior vice president of U.S. Sugar. So, until this conflict of interest travesty is changed, no "restoration" project or water-related decision will ever inconvenience Big Sugar.

Second, if all the reservoirs Ms. Wehle is selling were completed tomorrow, they wouldn't hold 10 percent of what is needed to stop the massive releases we've had during excessive water years.

Third, the recent "revision" of releases from the Corps still provides for the same amount of polluted waters to be dumped into the St. Lucie River from Lake Okeechobee. The massive releases and blue-green algae that we had last year haven't arrived this year, yet, because we haven't had a hurricane or excessive rain.

Fourth, the word restoration, so cavalierly used by SFWMD in news releases, must have a new definition because my Webster's Dictionary defines restoration as: To put or bring back, reestablish, reinstate, revive, renew, recover, regain, retrieve, win (back), put in a previous state, reclaim, reconstruct.

Frankly, none of those words come to mind when I read anything having to do with any currently proposed SFWMD, Army Corps of Engineers or state of Florida projects. Don't kid yourself, storing 62 billion gallons of water in Reservoir A-1 (in the Everglades Agriculture Area) is doing nothing but storing water for the sugar industry to use when needed.

Also, I find it a real stretch to call the storing of polluted waters by pumping it into the 300 proposed (\$6 million to \$8 million each) unproven deep wells "restoration." These reservoirs and proposed wells will simply create new storage cess pools that will have new problems to deal with 10-15 years from now. And not one of the four new reservoirs praised by SFWMD and years from completion is above Lake Okeechobee where 90 percent of the polluted water comes from. Yet, Ms. Wehle claims in a recent article that the new reservoirs "will improve the Everglades ecosystem, our coastal estuaries and Lake Okeechobee."

If you talk with the people who really know what restoration means, they will tell you that first we have to stop the polluted water from coming into Lake Okeechobee. Every project is about restoration and never about stopping the sources of pollution. Second, we have to implement the plan (Plan 6) described by Corps in a 1994 study that creates a flow way through the Everglades Agricultural Area. This flow way would take the excess waters and keep them from going into the St. Lucie estuary and Caloosahatchee River.

A good place for this spillway out of Lake Okeechobee would be the Herbert Hoover Dike that currently has a 50-50 chance of failing within four years. This proposed flow way through only 20 percent of the sugar fields would truly create a "natural" river of grass and would have Mother Nature restore the water before flowing into the Everglades. Any other project you read about is a bandage on a bullet wound. But, Plan 6 is much too simple a plan to implement, and not even discussed by the SFWMD, the state or the Corps. Can you guess why?

So, it is business as usual in Florida, where private industry slowly destroys a whole ecosystem, and political agendas and monetary objectives excuse any perversion of environmental fact.

One bright light is U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno holding SFWMD to a Jan. 1 deadline to meet the 10 parts per billion standard for water being sent into the Everglades from the EAA. Judge Moreno is a no-nonsense judge who knows what restoration really means.