

Is a sugar-free landscape the answer to red tide?

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By Ben Bova

A couple of years ago, I suggested that agricultural runoff from the sugar farms below Lake Okeechobee was a major contributor to the red tide algal blooms that bedevil our beaches in Southwest Florida.

Many people pooh-poohed the idea. But over the intervening months, evidence has mounted: Residues from fertilizers and pesticides sprayed on the sugar fields sink into the soil and are carried by streams and groundwater flow into the Gulf of Mexico.

We think of that as pollution. The algae living in the Gulf think of it as food.

They use the nutrients that the sugar growers so generously pour out to increase their numbers, and we get red tide blooms that kill fish, manatees and dolphins and cause respiratory problems among humans.

As an asthmatic, I'm particularly sensitive to the toxins released by those little bugs, but non-asthmatics also cough, sneeze and suffer burning, watery eyes when the red tide blooms.

To those who disbelieved that the sugar farms are a cause of red tide, I suggested an experiment: shut down the sugar farms for a year or two and see what happens.

That was impractical, of course. But now a former governor of Florida has taken my idea to its next logical step.

According to the Tallahassee Democrat, former Governor Claude Kirk has made an intriguing suggestion.

Kirk, 80, was elected governor in 1966, the first Republican to be elected governor of Florida since the post-Civil War era of Reconstruction. He has suggested that the state buy some 700,000 acres of privately owned farmland south of Lake Okeechobee and shut down the sugar growing.

The cost? About \$4 billion.

That sounds like a lot, but Gov. Kirk claims it might be a bargain for Florida taxpayers.

"You're going to pay \$8 billion to clean a mess someone else made," he said in an address to the Economic Club in Tallahassee a few weeks ago. "Why do you want to play around? Why not just buy (the) property?"

The idea makes some sense.

The federal and state governments have recognized that the Everglades badly need to be restored. What was once a "river of grass" that flowed from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf and Florida Bay has been chopped up, diverted and polluted by the demands of developers, boaters, sports fishermen and the ever-growing tide of people moving to Florida as part-time or full-time residents.

This has had a severe impact on our fresh water resources, as well as on wildlife such as the Florida panther, birds and fish.

Moreover, since sugar cultivation sucks enormous amounts of nutrients out of the ground, the sugar farms will eventually become unprofitable. As it stands now, more and more artificial fertilizers must be sprayed onto the sugar croplands to ensure good yields. This is the stuff that eventually drains into the Gulf and feeds red tide blooms.

Scientists have been very reticent to point the finger at the sugar growers, but the scientific evidence is mounting: algal blooms and all the deaths and discomforts that come with them are certainly made worse and more frequent by the runoff of agricultural fertilizers and pesticides.

So Washington and Tallahassee are planning to pump at least \$8 billion into a gigantic effort to restore the Everglades. All the money in the world won't be able to bring the Everglades back to its original condition, before developers began to replace grasslands and wetlands with concrete housing tracts and shopping malls, so that people like me could move down from the North and enjoy Florida's fine climate.

But our very quality of life is at stake here. Drinking water. Beaches where we can enjoy life without red tide blooms making us hack and sneeze. Some natural greenery instead of still another condo development.

That \$4 billion might be a wise investment. Instead of battling the sugar interests in court, which could take years or even decades, buy them out. Stop sugar growing altogether. It will greatly help the effort to restore the Everglades.

And it will have international ramifications, as well. The sugar interests in the U.S. have pressured the federal government to maintain a high protective tariff against importation of foreign sugar. Around the world, sugar sells for less than half of what we pay for it here in America, behind that tariff wall.

If we buy out the sugar farms and sugar production ceases in Florida, it may become possible to knock out that tariff. Not only will this halve the price of sugar in our retail stores, it will boost the economies of the wretchedly poor island nations of the Caribbean, such as Haiti, Granada, Jamaica – even Cuba.

The foreign relations "fallout" from such a move could be extremely beneficial to the region, and to the American family.

That \$4 billion purchase price might be a bargain for the taxpayers.

What will happen to the migrant workers who are employed on the sugar farms now? This is part of a much larger problem, that problem of immigration, both legal and illegal.

There have been reports that the sugar workers live in virtual slavery. Their housing is generally substandard, they are not allowed freedom of movement. Some claim that the owners confiscate the green cards of the immigrants who have entered the U.S. legally, which keeps them trapped where they are, on the sugar plantation.

If the state buys out these plantations and ends sugar cultivation, the state should provide job training for those immigrants who are here legally and turn over the illegals to the immigration authorities.

That would be the proper thing to do. But in the sad jumble of our badly outdated immigration policy, who knows what would actually happen?

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