

Historic Sugar Land Deal Should Bring Estuary-Saving "Flowway" Through EAA

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What do you do when your two worst enemies suddenly get together and do a wonderful thing for you?

Smile. Be stunned.

Smiling and being stunned are the reactions to an announcement that a huge chunk of Florida's long-polluting sugar land is to be bought by the state to dismantle the disastrous Drainage Machine that has troubled the Everglades, and degraded our two big estuaries to the east and west coasts, for the past fifty years.

In case you were off planet this month, the deal is this:

U.S. Sugar agrees in principle to sell its 187,000 acres, plus accoutrements like a refinery and railroad, to the state's South Florida Water Management District for \$1.7 billion.

Of course, observers say the Devil may be dancing in the details. But elated we can be at this point.

If the deal works out, it could meet the ultimate goal of the Rivers Coalition Defense Fund's federal lawsuit against the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. The sale would provide land for a flowway from Lake Okeechobee through what's left of Big Sugar. That in turn could stop nearly all the discharges that have hammered the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries in wet years.

That's huge for Martin and St. Lucie folks. Really huge. Still, the lawsuit moves forward at this point until and if there are concrete steps to move lake water south in large quantities of 6-10,000 cubic feet per second when appropriate.

The Rivers Coalition lawsuit against the Corps, which operates in lockstep partnership with the District, is an obvious factor leading to the Sugarland Deal. For two years, since we brought the flowway concept out of the government's morgue, we have personally kept Governors Jeb Bush and then Charlie Crist apprised. Crist has been interested, and that interest blossomed into the sale negotiations.

Other factors also are coming together in what can be likened to the overworked "Perfect Storm" analogy. Separate forces join to trigger a startling event, in this case a welcome one.

Amid the celebratory giddiness over the deal, you won't hear much about underlying situations that assuredly play roles. Here are five biggies:

1. The case for the flowway is so solid that it must be addressed and accomplished. It's been 50 years to the year since the Stuart area was assured by the Corps that an outlet south from Lake Okeechobee would be created.

2. The Everglades Restoration program is emerging more and more as flawed, being transformed into a water-supply program disguised as restoration that is crumbling by its own weight of misdeeds and incompetence.

3. Aquifer Storage Recovery wells, which have been envisioned to handle some 40 per cent of the excess water, are considered unworkable after all (excessive arsenic, among other problems). A storage flowway would be the sought-after "contingency" alternative.

4. Problems with the massive EAA reservoir, where cost overruns and suspect technology abound, could be solved by re-working the footprint of the great pit into the phased-out sugar property.

5. From Sugar's view, the deal could resolve a share-holders' lawsuit alleging that officers hid from shareholders a lucrative buyout offer and paid \$1 million in hush money to one of the key persons who worked on the offer. This is the kind of lawsuit one might want to snuff out at any cost.

More subtly, the Sugarland Deal gives the District a chance to don a good-guy hat and back away from its intransigent stance against the flowway based on sugar-friendly claims by people that include U.S.Sugar vice-president Malcolm (Bubba) Wade and staffers. They argued, and still do apparently, that a "bowl effect" due to subsidence makes a flowway impossible.

This can be called "The Great Bowl Hoax" in the view of many, including Rivers Coalition Defense Fund board member Ted Guy. The bowl effect ploy is based on sending water not through Plan Six but to the east where the topography is indeed higher.

Under Plan Six, the water would move slowly from the lake to Florida Bay, by gravity, thank you. And if there were bumps along the way, that's why there are pumps. Pumpage is standard procedure for the District.

No wonder that Sugar's Bubba Wade is resigning his seat on the District governing board as a conflict of interest.

It's important, now, to emphasize that the District's 2008 Board of Governors is a different animal from the one that ran the farm during decades of environmental ruination.

A new day of unfettered leadership is in place and hopefully will bring some long-needed staff changes.

No longer one of our worst enemies, the District stands on a doorstep leading to great things.

Its biggest challenge at this point is to move as quickly as possible, though we understand that the reform won't be accomplished immediately.

The plan is to let U.S. Sugar farm as usual for another six years. Among questions: Is that too long? Will there be cries for extending even that? Rockpit rights? Will that Satan cowering in the details bog down progress, as so many projects have stagnated in the past?

The unknowns linger.

But today let's celebrate the wedding and toast the bride and groom, whatever their past behaviors.

Credit to Volunteers

It may be noted that personal gains are the farthest thing from the minds of Defense Fund volunteers. It's an honor to work on the Defense Fund board with Chairman Leon Abood, Florida Oceanographic Director Mark Perry, attorney Ted Guy and hydrologist engineer Kevin Henderson. Henderson has exposed the drainage woes for two decades and deserves strong accolades from all. Instead, his insightful findings have been ignored and scoffed at by the drainers. But the overriding mission now is to press forward for true restoration and maximum benefits for the natural system and our citizenry. --KW