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Ray Judah: U.S. Sugar acquisition only option for our estuary and Everglades

By Ray Judah • Guest Opinion • May 25, 2010

Due to exceedingly high water levels in Lake Okeechobee, billions of gallons of polluted lake water are currently being released to the Caloosahatchee River.

In the absence of adequate storage or the ability to send water south to the Everglades, these releases result in continued destruction of our coastal estuaries.

Releases also waste large freshwater supplies that could be utilized by both residents and agriculture during drought. Currently, these serious concerns are trumped by the health and safety threat posed by the unreliable Herbert Hoover Dike.

Until the U.S. Sugar land acquisition is completed, there is literally no opportunity of meeting state and federal water quality standards in the Everglades or of preventing the damaging releases to the coastal estuaries.

Florida's intensive drainage projects and current water management regime replaced expansive natural wetlands with sugar and development.

We lost the system's natural connectivity that historically cleaned and managed the massive amounts of water that flowed from Orlando to Florida Bay.

During previous restoration planning, sugar farmers south of Lake Okeechobee refused to relinquish land needed to provide this vital storage and connectivity - forcing engineers and scientists to rely on the politically expedient, but highly questionable, aquifer storage and recovery wells and rock pits to provide the massive storage needed to restore the system.

Today, we finally have a willing seller in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

U.S. Sugar has 180,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee that can be used to store and clean

huge amounts of water.

This purchase, along with proper planning and engineering, could prevent further damage to the estuaries and enable cleaner water to be sent south without violating the stringent water quality standards in the Everglades.

But once again, politics and powerful sugar interests threaten restoration.

Business rival Florida Crystals is suddenly concerned that the U.S. Sugar land acquisition will threaten restoration, a handy smoke screen to cover their strategic business interests.

- Ray Judah, is the Lee County commissioner for District 3.

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