

GLADES COUNTY DEMOCRAT

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Serving the communities south of Lake Okeechobee

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Guest Commentary

Glades area is tired of being singled out

By Robert E. Coker

David Guest's Jan. 22 commentary in the Sun-Sentinel applauded a federal court ruling that essentially outlawed the cleanest 3 percent of the water going into Lake Okeechobee while ignoring the worst 97 percent. Until environmental groups let go of their obsession with sugar farmers and start attacking the major pollution problems north of the lake, everything downstream will continue to suffer.

The Clean Water Act was never intended to usurp a state's responsibility for moving water. Apparently Guest knows better than to suggest that the South Florida Water Management District not operate the pumps that move water from

the heavily populated urban areas to the bays, rivers and coastal estuaries. No, he attacks only the farming area south of Lake Okeechobee.

Not only is the water south of the lake some of the cleanest water in the entire system, but the farming areas south of the lake account for less than 3 percent of the water that goes into Lake Okeechobee. Water is backpumped from the rural communities of Belle Glade, South Bay and Clewiston only when excessive rainfall would otherwise flood these farming communities.

Stopping the ability to operate these pumps will cause these communities to be under water every year. People in the Glades are

growing weary of being singled out and treated differently from every other area in the system.

Ninety-seven percent of the pollution and the water flow into Lake Okeechobee comes from the northern half of the watershed, draining developments from Orlando south. This water is responsible for damaging both the lake and the coastal estuaries, yet no one is throwing the Clean Water Act around to stop this water, or to demand that it be cleaned before entering the lake. Instead, precious time and tax dollars are wasted on much lesser issues.

Everyone in South Florida lives in a man-made drainage system that we all recognize is not perfect. There are more than 3,000 various

structures around the lake that move water so that people, their homes and their property throughout the region do not flood.

Yet, only three of those structures, conveniently located in the farming communities, were the target of this judge's ruling.

The South Florida Sun-Sentinel, the lake and the people of South Florida would be better served by strongly insisting on an expedited program to restore Lake Okeechobee, rather than wasting time and money harassing sugar farmers and flooding the Glades communities.

Editor's note: Robert E. Coker is U.S. Sugar's senior vice president for public affairs.