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Brian Gleason column

: Big Sugar battles bad guy image



With Congress at work on a sweeping farm bill that will have far-reaching implications for its business for years, Big Sugar is on the offensive. It's not a new posture for the industry (comprised in Florida of Flo-Sun, U.S. Sugar and a growers co-op), but in addition to a multimillion-dollar war chest and dozens of lobbyists, it now has something else in its arsenal: results.

Some background: Florida's sugar industry is based south of Lake Okeechobee in an area known as the Everglades Agricultural Area. Sugarcane is grown on about 370,000 acres of the 700,000-acre EAA, down from 570,000 acres, according to Judy Sanchez, director of corporate communications for U.S. Sugar. While the area has been farmed since the turn of the century, the EAA was formally created in the late 1950s.

Extensive farming and a network of irrigation and stormwater drainage canals led to the pollution of the Everglades, with the primary culprit being runoff of phosphorus-rich sediment. The Everglades Forever Act was passed by the Florida Legislature in 1994. It was following in 2000 by the state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program, an \$11.9 billion cleanup effort. (Congress has failed to appropriate its share, as the 2000 water bill still has not been approved.)

Pilloried for decades as the biggest polluter of the Everglades, the industry now has hard data detailing their improved practices, while other pollution sources, especially urban development east of the Everglades and north of Lake Okeechobee, remain unchecked. Since 1996, sugar farmers have reduced phosphorus runoff by an average of 50 percent annually, twice the reduction required by the Everglades Forever Act. Sanchez said phosphorus levels in two EAA basins now contain lower levels of phosphorus than seven sites, rivers or canals that drain into Lake Okeechobee.

The Florida sugar industry survives due to price supports, import quotas and loan guarantees. While the industry calls the program a no-cost nonsubsidy, critics say the program props up the cost of sugar, costing consumers billions in higher food prices. The program has diverse supporters because it includes sugar beet and corn farmers, two other sweetener sources. Sugar is produced in four U.S. states and Puerto Rico. Corn is grown in 40 and sugar beets in 11, according to the United State Department of Agriculture.

Big Sugar is no stranger to exercising its financial and political might. In 1996, it pumped more than \$30 million into defeating a trio of state constitutional amendments that would have required sugar farmers to pay a one-cent tax on every pound of sugar produced. In classic example of voter dissonance, two amendments passed, including one to create a fund to clean up the Everglades, but the penny-a-pound amendment failed, meaning there was no money to put in the cleanup fund.

Regardless of how it fares in the new farm bill, it's clear Big Sugar has grown tired of being the bad guy.