

Sun-Sentinel

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ENVIRONMENT

FARMS DO THEIR PART IN CLEANUP

It's becoming more difficult to point fingers at the farmers of the Everglades Agricultural Area. They're no longer the villains in the state's ongoing efforts to reduce phosphorous levels in the River of Grass.

In fact, agricultural interests in the area have made a concerted effort to do their part in the cleanup. That's the good news, and it's backed up by South Florida Water Management District data that show that since 1996 the farmers have cut their volume of phosphorous discharge by an estimated 1,100 tons.

Is it perfect? Of course not. Stark differences remain in the results among the farms. There clearly is room for improvement in individual performance. Overall performance standards also could be improved, but that can't happen without the input of the farmers who have to bear the costs in establishing and reaching any new pollution standards.

The farmers aren't very popular at the moment, primarily because of their success at getting a clean-up bill favorable to their interests through the Florida Legislature and the governor's office. The new law sets back the deadline for cleaning up of phosphorous by at least 10 years and has caused consternation among environmentalists and many in Congress who see it as a major retreat from a joint state-federal initiative to restore the Everglades.

That debate continues in Congress, but back in South Florida, sugar and vegetable growers continue to implement new farming procedures that make prudent business sense and curb water pollution.

For example, sugar growers no longer "panic pump," pulling down water tables on their fields in advance of rain warnings and churning embedded phosphorous in the water table. Sampling the soil before planting also gives farmers a better idea of how much fertilizer should be used on new crops.

Farmers in the Everglades Agricultural Area can point to those efforts — and numerous others that have cost them millions of dollars — as tangible signs that they are trying to rid the Everglades of pollution.

The same can't be said for the encroaching urban areas to the east and southeast, where runoff from lawns, golf courses, horse farms and other properties in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties occurs unabated. There's also the legal challenge to the South Florida Water Management District's S-9 pump, which passes polluted water from west Broward County suburbs directly into the Everglades. That case is now before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Agriculture's big critics should consider taking on all polluters more forcefully in their effort to restore the Florida Everglades.

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JUNE 10, 2002

Good Everglades News Overlooked

Written by: Jeb Bush, Governor of Florida

The South Florida Sun-Sentinel's May 29 article, "Everglades bill raises taxes, critics argue," proves that it is impossible to satisfy some people. Instead of celebrating the unprecedented progress and success of Everglades restoration, some will create a reason -- without regard to the truth -- to complain and criticize this monumental project.

Meanwhile, the real news about Everglades restoration went virtually unreported last month. The Florida Legislature committed \$225 million in cash -- more than twice the amount originally anticipated this year -- and another \$800 million in bonding authority to keep Everglades restoration on schedule and on budget. Florida's total financial commitment to restore water flow now tops \$1.5 billion.

Florida is also keeping its commitment to restoring water quality. Since enactment of the 1994 Everglades Forever Act, more than \$600 million has been invested in cleaning up the famed River of Grass. Today, 90 percent of the water in the Everglades is clean.

The original law allowed the South Florida Water Management District to establish a property tax of one-tenth of a mill on all landowners in the Okeechobee Basin and additional taxes on farmers in the area. Amendments made this year did not change the property taxes, but did increase the tax on farmers 11 cents per acre, from \$24.89 to \$25, and extended it for three years, from 2013 to 2016. The law was expanded -- not extended -- to allow the South Florida Water Management District to use the estimated \$650 million in future revenue for advanced technologies to ensure cleanup of the remaining 10 percent of the Everglades.

We are keeping Florida's commitment to Everglades restoration.