

It's Time to Take a Hard Look at the Truth about Our Water Issues

By Robert H. Buker, Jr.

The conversation about water has reached a fevered pitch, and rightfully so. Red tide, blue-green algae, and Lake Okeechobee discharges are all extremely serious water issues that deserve serious attention. An abundance of scientific organizations, studies and data say that water quality plays a role in all of them. People may be surprised to hear that we agree.

However, these water issues are so important that the discussion and thus, the solutions, must be based on the facts rather than mere claims, hype or emotion. The News Press recently editorialized that "several key water projects are years from going online throughout Florida, but they are needed to treat and store water, slow Lake O discharge and redirect harmful water away from the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers." We agree with this as well.

Since sugarcane farmers have been blamed for everything from polluting the Everglades, to controlling lake discharges, causing red tide, and even Sahara Dust, our water has been under the microscope—literally and figuratively—for quite some time. Some articles even claim we're impacting Tampa Bay and putting sugar in Lake Okeechobee. Often coverage has been focused on blame, not truth. So in taking a hard look at South Florida's water run-off—we'll start with ours.

Many know that U.S. Sugar is the oldest and largest sugarcane farming company in South Florida; we also grow and process citrus, sweet corn and other winter vegetables. When we are called "Big Sugar" by the media, what people may not know is that we are primarily employee and charity owned. Also, our farms are all in Florida and are located primarily south of Lake Okeechobee.

Because water does not flow uphill and being located south of the lake, the run-off from our land does not naturally flow into the lake. For our water to reach the lake, it must be pumped. By law, the only water allowed to be pumped from our area back into Lake Okeechobee is emergency flood control for the lakeside cities, not protection for our farms. A small amount of our farm water is mixed with the cities' flood protection. This year that was 1%, yes only 1%, of the water flowing into Lake O.

Many folks on the Southwest Coast are very concerned that the water in the Caloosahatchee River flowing from Lake O causes red tide and harmful algae. We share that concern. Lake Okeechobee discharges are about 30% of the water that flowed down the Caloosahatchee this year. As I said, water from our sugarcane area south of the lake is only one percent. The rest is local run-off from lands along the river. There is a real problem but our water is not the reason.

The 2500 employee owners of U.S. Sugar are proud of our farming heritage, our farming communities and our efforts to clean the water leaving our farms. We plan to run a series of ads and social media efforts detailing factual information about our water and our role in water issues. We don't like the lies being told about us, even if they are great for fundraising for anti-farming groups. We sincerely want the problems of red tide and algae to be solved, yet they will only be solved by solutions built on truth. Frankly, these water issues are so serious and complex that unless we start moving the discussion from hype to truth and base solutions on science rather than slogans, these problems will never actually be solved.

No one wants these problems solved more than we do. To that end, U.S. Sugar and its people are committed to being open and honest about our water, our farming practices and our heartfelt desire to work with our neighbors to use sound science and factual information to solve all of our shared water issues.

Mr. Buker is the President & CEO of U.S. Sugar
He lives in rural Glades County

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