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Letters to the Editor

Rural counties not forgotten

Rural counties should not continue to be short-changed in Florida's effort to clean up our environment. The government's purchase of a 1770-acre grove in Glades County is just the latest example of how rural counties are slowly losing their agricultural jobs and tax base.

Having bought the grove southeast of Ortona Lock for \$37 million (\$22,000 per acre), SFWMD plans to invest at least another \$100 million converting the grove into a water quality treatment facility for nitrogen removal. That's a worthy ambition and one sure to create some new local jobs. But why can't we make nutrient removal a private enterprise business that keeps

land on the tax roles and spurs a new green industry for our rural counties?

In 2005, University of Florida researchers reported that the first six SFWMD Stormwater Treatment Areas (STA's) are doing their job to eliminate nutrient pollution from our waters at an average cost of \$350 per pound of phosphorus removed. That's more than a hundred times what farmers spend to buy and apply phosphorus fertilizers to their crops and more than ten times what homeowners spend putting down phosphorus fertilizers on their lawns and gardens. Similarly, the proposed Caloosahatchee reservoir will spend approximately one dollar per thousand gallons per year for "effective" water storage to reduce periodic high flows to the estuary. A farmer who currently

grows sugarcane could earn the same amount of money, approximately \$1000 per acre per year, by storing just three acre-feet of water.

At \$350 per pound of phosphorus or per acre-foot of water, there is clearly a business opportunity for rural counties. Unfortunately that business is still based entirely within the government agencies on public lands rather than being translated to the private sector. SFWMD has started the ball rolling by developing the technologies and establishing an initial market value for land-based environmental clean-up services. Now is the time to start working towards privatization of these green industries so that the lands can remain on county tax roles.

The state needs to assign major resources to help develop

new business models so farmers and rural workers can get started into the water storage and nutrient removal industry as well as related opportunities like carbon sequestration credits. If farmers and agri-businesses in rural counties were paid at the same rates as government currently spends on these environmental activities then nutrient removal and water storage would become a lucrative new services and commodity market. And like the agricultural industries development of past decades, rural support agencies such as USDA, FDACS, IFAS and the Cooperative Extension Service should be tasked with the job of helping farmers enter and compete in these profitable new markets.

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