

Culture War Erupts Over Reservoir Plan

Senator Negrón's proposal to accelerate construction of a storage reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee, through Senate Bill 10, has generated a high stakes controversy and with it an "us versus them" culture war between inland agricultural interests and coastal communities.

Excessive discharges from the Lake to both east and west coast communities occurred again in 2016. Predictably, massive algal blooms were the result followed by Governor Scott's state of emergency declaration. The coastal ecosystems were devastated, property values declined, businesses and tourism were impacted and human health was threatened.

For many coastal residents and businesses, 2016 was the last straw following years of damaging discharges to the coasts while inland agricultural interests enjoy near perfect flood control and drought protection as a result.

The 2015 University of Florida's study on options for moving water south, the closest thing to an independent review, reported the need for significantly more storage both north and south of the Lake. This was also consistent with the River of Grass (ROG) proposal from 2008 that would have purchased significant areas of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of the Lake with options to buy the land through 2020. The ROG plan was welcomed initially by most interests including those in government and U.S. Sugar.

But, more recently, corporate sugar interests no longer seem interested in selling their land for a south flow-way and reservoir. Apparently, the future profit potential of converting the land to other uses may be the reason for the resistance since the original deal brokered under the Crist administration eight years ago. As Negrón's reservoir project makes its way through the legislative session, a full-blown war of words has erupted. Credible scientific and economic experts have declared the proposal vital while others say it's counterproductive.

Agricultural interests known for their longstanding legislative influence and for their apparent success at media propaganda with full page ads in newspapers decrying the reservoir plan have contributed to the polarization of the issue.

One outcome of Big Sugar's influence is promotion of a "David and Goliath" perception where inland small town mom and pop farmers, opposed to the reservoir are pitted against the so-called elitist coastal communities dominated by rich and foreign tourist interests. Ironically, this propaganda ignores the fact that immigrant sugar farmers have become millionaires in the business of corporate industrial agriculture and coastal tourist based businesses have mostly domestic owners not too different from most mom and pop operations.

Coastal communities with a vast majority of electoral influence compared to sparsely populated inland areas, have continued to re-elect many of the status quo politicians. This irony may be attributed to Republican voter loyalty and dominance in many coastal districts despite declining water quality with Republicans in power for at least a decade. Or, they have been duped by "status quo" propaganda from incumbents backed by wealthy agriculture interests or both.

Waiting another 20 or 30 years for the status quo solution ignores the current and growing uncertainty associated with climate change and a rapidly increasing state population thirsty for water as a competing interest.

Senator Negrón's proposal is a bold step challenging the status quo.

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