

# All lagoon committee members have taken Big Sugar money

By Jonathan Mattise

Posted August 4, 2013 at 4 a.m.

Each Florida senator tasked with addressing the policies that pollute the Indian River Lagoon has benefitted from Big Sugar donations.

All eight members of a new state Senate panel on the harmful Lake Okeechobee discharges into the lagoon have accepted campaign cash from sugar's biggest players within their last two elections. Sen. Joe Negron, a Stuart Republican who convened and will chair the panel, is the committee's biggest beneficiary of sugar donations.

Three of the committee members didn't take sugar money in the 2012 election cycle, but received checks from Big Sugar in their second-most recent elections — either 2008 or 2010, since senators serve four-year terms on a staggered schedule.

Even with three senators abstaining last election, committee members took in at least \$69,250 combined from sugar. That doesn't include what they accepted through seven no-limit political committees, which totals \$828,500 since 2008.

## POTENTIAL CONFLICT

The Select Committee on Indian River Lagoon and Lake Okeechobee Basin is tasked with writing a report on potential policy and budget changes to aid the ailing lagoon. Those suggestions could end up in a bill or the budget next legislative session, which starts in March.

Environmental advocates argue Lake Okeechobee discharges should flow naturally south toward the Everglades, right through sugar lands. Instead, the water is released east into the St. Lucie Estuary and west to the Caloosahatchee River via canals. The nutrient-laden freshwater can be harmful for marine wildlife and vegetation, and can produce algae blooms toxic to humans.

Sugar critics also contend the companies don't pay their fair share to clean up the River of Grass, and taxpayers foot the bill.

"It really should shock the conscience of the community to have such a big lobbying industry going on all the time," said Karl Wickstrom, coordinator of Stuart-based Rivers Coalition Defense Fund.

## NO SURPRISE

Nathaniel Reed, a Jupiter Island resident and Everglades Foundation vice president, said the sugar love shouldn't come as a surprise. The industry hasn't sprinkled cash solely to those on the new. Its influence spans the entire statehouse and beyond.

"They own the Legislature to the extent that they donate to every single leading member," Reed said.

U.S. Sugar Corp. and Florida Crystals Corp., the two biggest sugar players, gave candidates, committees and parties millions of dollars in 2012 through various related companies, subsidiaries and executives. Republicans received more, but they also hold majorities in both legislative chambers and occupy the Governor's Mansion.

Each campaign account check is limited to \$500 for a primary election, \$500 for the general. Some lawmakers received 30 or more \$500 donations from a bevy of differently named companies and individuals, each ultimately under the sugar umbrella. The checks featured names of railroad companies,

citrus producers, international exporters and homemakers, but the money stems back to powerful sugar conglomerates and executives.

#### NEGRON: NO INFLUENCE

The biggest sugar cash poured into lawmaker-operated political committees that don't face contribution limits. Negron and Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Fort Myers, share two fundraising groups that brought in \$90,000 combined from sugar since 2010. A Negron committee accepted the biggest single check, \$150,000 from U.S. Sugar.

Benacquisto, who represents a Gulf Coast region similarly bombarded by lake releases, received at least \$23,750 in sugar money last election. The Senate majority leader's campaign account total is the highest on the lagoon committee.

Negron said campaign checks don't determine how he votes.

For instance, Negron was the lone senator to vote against HB 999, which blocked lawsuits on 30-year, no-bid leases for sugar farmers in the northern Everglades. Gov. Rick Scott has signed the bill into law.

"I think my voting record shows that whether it's the insurance industry, agricultural community, whatever group it is, I will weigh each issue on its pros and cons and make the best judgment that I believe is possible," Negron said during a June forum on the lagoon at the Stuart News.

#### FINDING SUGAR DONORS

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers sifted through state campaign finance records and found dozens of sugar-related donors, almost all of which trace back to U.S. Sugar Corp. or Florida Crystals Corp. Here is a look at how some donations are in the industry's interest, but don't indicate ties to sugar at first glance.

##### South Central Florida Express

Subsidiary of U.S. Sugar; short line railroad with 156 miles of track, 14 locomotives, 950 railcars and 54 employees; hauls sugar cane, fertilizer, lumber, paper and citrus products

Donated to Negron, Benacquisto, Montford, Grimsley, Dean (2008), Hays (2010)

Donated about \$55,250 in 2012 state elections

##### St. Lucie River Co. Ltd.

Limited partnership listed in state incorporation and campaign finance records at two West Palm Beach addresses used by Florida Crystals; listed as partner of Closter Farms Inc., which includes a Fanjul sugar family member as chairman/director; described as "sugar" in certain contribution records

Donated to Negron, Benacquisto, Hays (2010), Dean (2008)

Donated about \$10,500 in 2012 state elections

##### Florida Pioneer Investments

Listed in campaign finance records at the same West Palm Beach address as Florida Crystals; includes a Fanjul sugar family member as director

Donated to Benacquisto; Dean (2008); Alliance for a Strong Economy, a Negron committee; Floridians for Better Leadership, a Montford committee

Donated about \$91,500 in 2012 state elections

#### A SUGARY LAGOON COMMITTEE

Here is a look at how much sugar money state senators on the Indian River Lagoon and Lake Okeechobee committee have received:

Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart (chairman)

Raised for 2012 election: \$692,731

At least \$15,500 from sugar interests

\$690,000 to unlimited contribution committees from sugar interests:

Alliance for a Strong Economy (shared with Benacquisto)

\$345,000 from sugar interests since 2008

Freedom First Committee

\$235,000 from sugar interests since 2009

Protect Our Liberty (shared with Benacquisto)

\$60,000 from sugar interests since 2011

Florida Conservative Majority

\$30,000 from sugar interests since 2010

Florida Conservative Action Committee

\$20,000 from sugar interests since 2012

Sen. Bill Montford, D-Tallahassee (vice chair)

Raised for 2012 election: \$344,967

\$7,500 from sugar interests

\$100,000 to unlimited contribution committee, Floridians for Effective Leadership, since 2010

Sen. Charles Dean, R-Inverness (vice chair)

Raised for 2012 election: \$113,225

\$0 directly from sugar interests (two donations from committees with large sugar contributions)

Raised for 2008 election: \$460,644

\$10,500 from sugar interests

\$10,000 to unlimited contribution committee Nature Coast Conservative Coalition from Alliance for a Strong Economy (large recipient of sugar money; see Negron)

Sen. Denise Grimsley, R-Sebring

Raised for 2012 election: \$914,449

At least \$19,500 from sugar interests

\$38,500 to unlimited contribution committee, Saving Florida's Heartland, from sugar interests since 2008

Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Fort Myers

Raised for 2012 election: \$729,846

At least \$23,750 from sugar interests

\$405,000 to unlimited contribution committees from sugar interests:

Protect Our Liberty (shared with Negron)

\$60,000 from sugar interests since 2011

Alliance for a Strong Economy

\$345,000 from sugar interests since 2008

Sen. Maria Sachs, D-Delray Beach

Raised for 2012 election: \$343,566

\$3,000 from sugar interests

Sen. Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa

Raised for 2012 election: \$66,913

\$0 directly from sugar interests

Raised for 2010 election: \$56,838  
\$1,000 from sugar interests

Sen. Alan Hays, R-Umatilla  
Raised for 2012 election: \$220,335  
\$0 directly from sugar interests  
Raised for 2010 election: \$396,142  
\$15,500 from sugar interests

Source: Florida Division of Elections