Guest Commentary: ‘Plan 6’ only viable solution to Okeechobee water discharges

By Ray Judah

http://www.pineisland-eagle.com/page/content.detail/id/527331/Guest-Commentary---Plan-6--only-viable-solution-to-Okeechobee-water-discharges.html?nav=5049#sthash.JTm4T9YD.dpuf

Water issues was the topic of conversation at the Tiger Bay Club business luncheon on June 27 in downtown Fort Myers. Given the insufficient storage proposed under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program to alleviate the massive releases of excessive polluted water from Lake Okeechobee that is causing adverse impacts to the coastal estuaries on the west and east coast of south Florida, there was discussion on the restoration of a flow way south to the Everglades.

Plan 6, which has long been proposed as the solution to establish a portion of the historic flow way from Lake Okeechobee south to Everglades National Park, would provide the needed water storage, treatment and conveyance of water to the south, thereby avoiding harm to the west and east coast estuaries.

Unfortunately, a high-ranking official from the South Florida Water Management District made an irresponsible and unsubstantiated statement that Plan 6 would cost $20 billion dollars and therefore, not be financially feasible.

The sugar industry has staunchly opposed any restoration of a semblance of a flow way in the approximately 700,000 acre Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee and the SFWMD and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have yet to conduct a peer reviewed study evaluating the merits of a flow way through the EAA.

In 2008, George Cavros prepared an analysis of a storage flow-way plan to restore and protect the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Estuaries, Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades in a comprehensive and detailed report for The Rivers Coalition that demonstrated a flow-way south of the lake to be the most practical and cost effective solution to alleviating the massive releases of water from Lake Okeechobee that is causing adverse harm to coastal estuaries.

The proposed flow-way in the EAA south of Lake Okeechobee requires state acquisition of approximately 20,000 acres of U.S. Sugar lands and approximately 30,000 acres of Florida Crystals lands to provide sufficient storage, treatment and conveyance of water from Lake Okeechobee south to the Everglades.

The combined acreage of 50,000 acres is only 7 percent of agricultural lands in the EAA and 15 percent of sugar cane fields thereby assuring a sustainable agricultural industry and restoration of Lake Okeechobee and Everglades and protection of coastal estuaries.
Based on land value of $7,400 per acre when the State was pursuing purchase of U.S. Sugar land holdings a few years ago, an inflated adjustment to $8,000 per acre would place the current purchase of the needed 50,000 acres at approximately $400 to 500 million. Even land conversion cost for a meandering flow way including a combination of shallow water reservoirs and wetlands with other infrastructure such as pumps and containment berms along with land coast would be comparable to the approximately $1 billion for the C-43 reservoir, $2.6 billion for the Central Everglades Planning Project and $3 billion for Aquifer Storage Recovery Wells.

Plan 6 is the fix and a flow way in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of a Lake Okeechobee is the only meaningful solution to "get the water right" and restore and protect our coastal estuaries.

Ray Judah is a former Lee County Commissioner who is a representative of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition