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The Shell Game of Politics and Water Quality

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Governor Rick Scott's July public relations event on Pine Island touting our "pristine waterways" was yet another feeble attempt to convince the public that he and his policies are making Florida a better place to live. The supporting cast of Representatives Matt Caldwell, whose legislation is frequently a gift to big sugar, and Ray Rodrigues, now sponsoring legislation to remove home rule on oil and gas fracking were there singing the same tune.

The following month the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) announced that Matlacha Pass State Aquatic Preserve, a few miles from where Governor Scott made his speech, was officially impaired for nutrient pollution. Matlacha Pass designated a Florida Aquatic Preserve in 1972 for its exceptional natural and cultural resources is an Outstanding Florida Water and may be the first Southwest Florida Aquatic Preserve designated impaired from excess nitrogen.

Florida Aquatic Preserves require a higher level of protection and apparently the Governor and his supporting politicians were not familiar with that component of Florida water law. Part of the Governor's speech was about the \$1.7 million the legislature allocated this year for local waterway improvement projects. On the surface this sounds like progress but behind the scenes the Governor and his political allies, including local ones, are systemically changing Florida water law. The policy changes are evident from rule and regulation revisions that weaken Florida water resource protection that typically blur the threshold for compliance on resource permit provisions. The result is more pollution.

Another tactic is to terminate critical water resource monitoring when it becomes evident that water permit compliance, dependent on the water data, will get in the way of political expediency. Without litigation from conservation groups, the situation would likely be worse and the cleanup costs would be much higher.

The losers are local communities and businesses especially where the economy is largely based on tourism and property values linked to water resource appeal. The water quality funding from Tallahassee is a mere drop in the bucket compared to the current and eventual clean up costs and only serves to mask the root causes mired in politics.

A significant contributor to the recent impairment of Matlacha Pass is the northwest spreader canal system in Cape Coral. The area was previously designated by permit and regulation as a stormwater treatment area but all that changed as a result of removing the Ceitus Canal barrier in 2008 to facilitate direct boat access to Matlacha Pass. Removing the barrier was like pulling the plug on a bathtub of dirty water. The result was the loss of over 600 acres of stormwater treatment area that created a massive point source of inadequately treated runoff flowing directly into Matlacha Pass. The impairment that followed was predictable as development is surging in the upstream watershed and little is being done to mitigate the impacts or comply with permit provisions. FDEP staff won't even comment on the issue.

Consider telling your local and state politicians that you value clean water. Otherwise there will never be enough funds to change the current trend of declining water quality.

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