As implemented, “Water Farming” is likely a boondoggle. It is hard to tell, but safe to assume. We actually proposed water ranching back in the late 90’s as an outcome of our (UF/IFAS) Kissimme/Okeechobee research finding. Calusa Waterkeeper (CRCA-Riverwatch) pushed for it in the mid 2000’s (primarily me, Wayne Daltry, Marti Daltry, and some others). Unfortunately the SFWMD allowed companies to game the concept. However, when implemented on public lands water farming may be a cost-effective program (based on a SFWMD audit report).

In our original proposal the water farming concept included:
1. Critical habitats (wetlands, etc.) should not be targeted for water ranching if such flooding would eliminate important ecosystem (wildlife, etc) functions of that land.
2. Farmers would first sell their development rights through a conservation easement to ensure long-term use for water storage.
3. Farmers would use the conservation easement revenue to re-plumb their land for water storage.
4. Farmers would be required to enter into a long-term storage compensation contract (40+ years) to ensure the arrangement was as dependable as central reservoir infrastructure.
5. The state would develop and install effective monitoring systems to verify actual storage and to control the timing of subsequent release as well as collect before/after water quality data.
6. The state would take action to possibly install nutrient capture systems at the outfalls (discharge points) since flooding agricultural lands has the potential to cause the soil-bound phosphorus to go into solution and leave the property when the stored waters are later released.

As implemented I do not think any of the above conditions were required of the Dispersed Storage program established by our state agencies. Instead, SFWMD grants contracts to pay farmers up front to reconfigure farm land. The state also pays farmers to store water over a few years for "assumed" volumes of water. The land can be developed at some future point or taken out of the water storage program. The lands selected and the management approaches taken could also possibly degrade the prior land use value to wildlife.

So, given lack of adherence to the above 6 points, the Dispersed Storage program is probably not a cost-effective alternative to state lands or central reservoirs. It would require an honest analysis of the program to reach an accurate conclusion.

Also, I think that point 6 (phosphorus release prevention) may be contributing to this year's algal blooms. I am attempting some analysis of data now and will report when I have some basis for a conclusion or at least a stronger hypothesis.

I am also a co-author on a paper that seeks to evaluate the trade-offs associated with water storage in the EAA alongside farming. It can be viewed at

John Capece