

Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Jr.: Sour grapes should not stop Everglades restoration

Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Jr. • Special to news-press.com • June 17, 2010

With all due respect to the Sugar Cane Co-op's elder statesman George Wedgworth, I must take issue with the way that he blatantly misrepresented both my prior statements and U.S. Sugar's current position regarding Everglades restoration. ("U.S. Sugar land buy costly, not needed for Everglades restoration," June 8.)

Wedgworth quoted a 2006 statement I made regarding water storage in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) not solving Lake Okeechobee and the estuary problems.

Back then, South Florida was reeling from multiple hurricanes and their attendant heavy rainfall that resulted in massive, damaging discharges to both the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Coastal residents were outraged and called for sending more water south to be stored in the EAA.

My position in 2006 and now is that those who understand the technical and scientific facts of the South Florida system should understand that the lake suffers from both poor water quality and tremendous stormwater discharges coming from the large watershed north of the lake.

The estuaries suffer from massive discharges of poor quality water from the lake, but a significant volume of poor quality water is also discharged locally between the lake and the estuaries.

Storage of Lake Okeechobee water on U.S. Sugar land or other land is an important and high-priority first step, but without water quality facilities north of the lake and water quality and storage features upstream of the estuaries, Lake storage alone will not solve all the lake and estuary issues.

This is why I said water storage in the EAA will not solve the Lake Okeechobee and estuary problems. It cannot be the solution alone, but it can be a vital part of the total solution. The other side of the coin is that any solution without a significant EAA

component won't solve the problem either.

Understanding these sound science and engineering priorities is why the Florida Legislature stepped in with the Northern Everglades and Estuary Recovery (PEER) plan that committed hundreds of millions of dollars to protect these resources.

In addition, the State and South Florida Water Management District put a billion dollars into restoration projects that benefit Lake Okeechobee and the estuaries on the fast track with their Accelr8 projects.

Today, as Wedgworth admitted, many of those projects are already under way to provide additional storage north of the Lake.

The one indisputable constant, both then and now, is that South Florida's water management system must deal with massive volumes of water in a much smaller natural system than existed historically.

As evidenced by the recent flush of damaging releases from Lake Okeechobee, there remains a vital need for even more water storage and water treatment. From a purely scientific standpoint, storage is storage. Ideally, it would be located close to Lake Okeechobee and be easily connected to other parts of the natural system.

That being said, the main difference between 2006 and today is the presence of a willing seller of large amounts of land south of Lake Okeechobee — U.S.

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Sugar.

The benefit to the entire system is that our land is located next to the lake and in the natural flow path of the Everglades.

Also, agricultural land south of the lake sells for a fraction of the cost of land north, east or west of Lake Okeechobee.

With nearly 200,000 acres of U.S. Sugar property available, water managers, scientists and engineers can design truly large-scale water storage and treatment projects that will be much more efficient and economic than a bunch of smaller such projects scattered throughout the system.

U.S. Sugar has always believed that sound science and engineering rather than emotion or rhetoric must drive restoration. We believe that still today.

Unfortunately, some of our sugar competitors remain mired in the past and refuse to look beyond their own self-interests. Don't let their sour grapes impede restoration.

— **Malcolm S. "Bubba" Wade, Jr.**, is senior vice president of sugar operations for U.S. Sugar Corp.

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