

Women voters support sugar land purchase

Clara Anne Graham Laura Miller 12:10 a.m. EDT May 3, 2015



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

The League of Women Voters of Lee County has long been concerned about the environmental health of our part of Florida. We say — and mean it — that we, “Promote an environment beneficial to life through the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest.”

In recent years, we have been increasingly dismayed at what happens to our estuary when, during the rainy season, Lake Okeechobee reaches a dangerous depth and the Corps of Engineers releases water in order to take pressure off the dike. The only place for that water to go — and it is polluted with phosphorous, nitrogen and other chemicals — is into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers and ultimately to their estuaries.

When it was announced nearly seven years ago that Governor Crist had worked out with U.S. Sugar a plan for the purchase of land we were delighted. Doesn't it make sense that at least some of the damage to the estuaries can be prevented if much of the polluted water never gets into the rivers? We also sometimes forget that the Everglades have a constant need for clean, fresh water. Sending the water first to a reservoir for cleansing and then on through the Everglades and into Florida Bay could go a long way toward meeting that

need.

After seeing the article “U.S. Sugar Makes Case” in the News-Press on April 28, we felt that we must make a public statement on the matter. To say the least, we find U.S. Sugar's argument self serving, since it has already made clear that they no longer want to sell the land. In that article, Rep. Matt Caldwell, from the Southwest Florida Legislative Delegation, uses as justification for opposing the land purchase a report from the University of Florida. We too are familiar with this document. It is an independent technical review by six respected scientists from the UF Water Institute. What they say early in the paper is that the projects currently underway and planned for the future in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) should certainly be carried out. How could anybody disagree with this statement? To our knowledge nobody has ever suggested that the projected use of the U.S. Sugar land would replace other much-needed projects.

We suggest that Rep. Caldwell look more carefully into the UF document. Pages 28-59 analyze already-existing state and federal plans to move fresh water through the system. Like all good researchers, the authors look at all sides. In their summary, they say, “Repeated planning exercises have shown that large volumes of inter-annual storage are required north, south, east and west of Lake Okeechobee to manage Lake Okeechobee levels with a desirable range, reduce damaging high and low flows to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, and move more water south for agricultural, urban and ecosystem uses. (p. 56)”

On page 102 the scholars come to this conclusion: “Currently, the state of Florida has an option to purchase approximately 46,000 acres in the EEA The option is set to expire in October 2015. Thus, the state has a limited window of opportunity to purchase this land at market prices. Given the limited opportunity and the uncertainty of any future similar opportunities to purchase large acreages of lands in the EEA, the state should consider the time-limited option.”

We leave the public to decide what is in their interest.

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