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No Time To Wait: Everglades Restoration Must Remain a Priority

10/11/2008
Naples Daily News

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By KIRK FORDHAM, Palmetto Bay CEO, Everglades Foundation

NAPLES — With the pending acquisition of U.S. Sugar, Floridians' hopes of witnessing meaningful Everglades restoration were considerably raised. But a report issued last week by the National Research Council (NRC) reminded us of the many obstacles confronting the ambitious effort to restore the River of Grass. Urging swift action to put the restoration effort back on track, the NRC report warns that to do nothing is, in fact, to do harm.

This report serves as yet another reminder that we are in a race against time to forestall the ecological decline of the Everglades and we must move immediately to conserve this priceless national resource — one which provides huge economic benefits and tens of thousands of jobs to our state.

In fact, where environmental restoration efforts are under way in Florida, the results have been nothing short of remarkable.

Along the Kissimmee River, which is halfway through its restoration process, there has been an immediate rebound of wildlife that once inhabited the area. Bald eagles are regularly spotted, wading bird populations have multiplied and numerous species of ducks have returned to sections of the river that have been completed.

The progress achieved along the Kissimmee River has been a bonanza for individuals and families who relish the fishing, paddling, camping and hunting opportunities made possible by this successful effort.

In Southwest Florida, where an area known as the Picayune Strand is being restored, deer, woodstork, black bear and Florida panthers are moving back into their original habitat, even before the project returns the natural flow of water into the region. The project will eventually allow the right mix of fresh and salt water to flow south into the spectacular Ten Thousand Islands area of Everglades National Park, allowing declining fish populations to rebound and the recovery of portions of Florida Bay.

If the environmental and economic benefits of Everglades restoration are so obvious, it's clear they could speed up the implementation of several critical initiatives:

We must complete the first phase of elevating U.S. 41 (Tamiami Trail) to increase the flow of freshwater into Everglades National Park. While the first bridge is under construction, planning for the next phase should begin immediately.

Second, the South Florida Water Management District has done a commendable job of jump-starting the critical C-111 Canal Project, which will direct freshwater to the southern Everglades and northeastern Florida Bay. The benefits to the huge number of people who enjoy the recreational opportunities provided by the bay are immeasurable.

Third, Gov. Charlie Crist's bold proposal to purchase 187,000 acres of prime agricultural land from U.S. Sugar must move forward. This achievement will protect the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries from damaging freshwater releases, while providing an enormous new supply of clean water to sustain the core Everglades and South Florida's drinking water supply.

Finally, Florida must restore water quality of the over-managed and highly polluted Lake Okeechobee watershed. Aside from the ecological and economic damage inflicted on the lake and the surrounding communities, the abundance of nitrates and other pollution poses great risk and difficulty in restoring the flow of clean water to the Everglades.

Florida is running out of time to salvage the Everglades. Our children will judge us harshly if we fail in this responsibility. Several key projects are under way and must be completed without further delay. The time to act is now.

Kirk Fordham may be reached via e-mail at kfordham@evergladesfoundation.org or by phone at (305) 251-0001, ext. 227. The Everglades Foundation is a national organization dedicated solely to protecting and restoring "one of the world's most unique natural ecosystems." The Everglades Foundation is a not-for-profit, charitable organization.

Grimsle: State, Local Leaders Need to Wor Together

10/12/2008

Tampa Tribune

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When she was in her mid-20s, Denise Grimsley, now 48 and a registered nurse, never dreamed she would get involved in politics. That changed when her father became ill in the mid-1990s and she stepped in to run his petroleum and convenience store businesses.

In looking out for her father's business interests, Grimsley traveled to Tallahassee to speak with state officials. She was shocked at how legislators were discussing important issues, such as the threat to the citrus industry from the canker disease. Too many legislators she heard, especially senators, were arrogant, uninformed on important issues, not interested in learning about, and uninterested in dealing with real problems that affected people in Highlands and other counties.

In four years, Grimsley will be term limited out of her state representative seat. So will Sen. J.D. Alexander. She has been mentioned as a possible successor to Alexander in the state Senate. Is she interested? "Highlands County is an important part of that Senate district and it's traditionally been held by someone from Polk County. But I think it can be won by someone from Highlands County."

Q: The Florida Legislature shifted a chunk of the tax burden to local cities and counties. Was this a good or a bad move? Please explain your answer.

The state pays for more than its fair share of health care, law enforcement and even school funding. When we consider new legislation which has a funding requirement, the fiscal impact is measured, and in recent years due to the slowing economy, we have tried to avoid any new spending at the state or local level.

I have fought for Highlands County during my time in the Legislature, and have worked with local elected officials to make provisions for fiscally constrained counties to have money returned to them from property tax reductions.

The slowing economy is having an effect on all budgets, from state to local governments. But the most important budget is the family budget. State and local leaders should work together to ensure tax dollars are being spent efficiently while we make Florida affordable again for our families.

Q: Do you believe the environmental laws are adequate, inadequate or too stringent?

As a representative of the largest agricultural district in the state, I believe we have to keep in mind the necessity of feeding our nation and not become dependent on foreign nations for our food supply. Agriculture and the environment can co-exist but it must be

through a balancing act. We need to maintain laws and regulations that are effective in protecting our environment and our natural resources while maintaining a business atmosphere that is healthy and enables our economy to grow. The state of Florida has some of the most aggressive and progressive environmental regulations in the nation. For example, we are far ahead of most other states in the development and adoption of Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs). In an effort to meet these water quality standards, the agriculture industry has implemented best management practices (BMPs), which are farming practices developed to prevent impacts to surrounding areas.

This past year was a landmark year for the environment. We extended the nation's most successful land conservation program another 10 years, increasing the funding for land acquisition from \$3 billion to \$5.3 billion. In addition, despite some of the toughest financial times we've had in decades, we have continued to fulfill our commitment to restoring the Everglades.

Q: Is Florida's property tax system fair? If not how would you change it?

This past legislative session we made revisions to the composition of the Value Adjustment Board to include two private citizens, not just elected officials, and reformed the property appraisal process to protect property owners from unfair and over taxation. The legislation begins to ensure properties are taxed on their use, not their potential.

Presumption of Correctness of an assessment (in the challenge of an assessment) should be abolished. The burden should be on the property appraiser, not the property owner. The re-capture provision on the Save Our Homes exemption should also be eliminated. The mere fact that we have to continue to pay taxes on property we own is unfair.

Q: Do you support Governor Crist's deal with U.S. Sugar? Was it handled properly?

At the end of June, Gov. Charlie Crist and representatives from the United States Sugar Corporation (U.S. Sugar) announced the beginning of negotiations for an agreement to purchase 187,000 acres of agricultural land, nearly 300 square miles of land in Hendry, Glades and Palm Beach Counties. The land will be used to reconnect Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

I was deeply disappointed in the way this announcement was handled by the governor's office. The Everglades restoration is a partnership of the state and federal governments. The governor's office chose not to brief any elected officials representing the district prior to the press release to the Palm Beach Post. Consequently, the lack of information made it impossible to answer my constituents' questions as word spread rapidly throughout Clewiston and the surrounding communities. I believe the Governor's Office should have been more sensitive to the residents, and the uncertainty this proposal created in their lives.

While I applaud and support the effort to take a global approach to restoring Florida's Everglades, I have two concerns. First, the economic re-development of the area, and second, does the South Florida Water Management District have the revenue to pay for the purchase without raising taxes. It is imperative that we find a

balance between preserving the environment and protecting the agricultural jobs that will be lost by this purchase in this rural region. This is a region that has counted on the sugar industry for economic prosperity for decades.

For all the potential positive impacts this deal could have it could also have drastic consequences for thousands of residents in the area if an appropriate economic development plan is not formulated. If an appropriate plan is formulated it will be a win-win situation for everyone.

What can the Legislature do to keep home insurance rates low in the coming years?

Encourage competition and increase funding for mitigation programs. This combination will allow rates to continue to drop.

Alexander Believes Decisions on Budget Cuts Need to Be Reviewed

10/12/2008

Tampa Tribune

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In national politics, the Kennedys and the Bushes are America's first families. In Florida politics, Ben Hill Griffin and his grandchildren take that title.

Griffin, a conservative Democrat, was a member of the Florida Senate four years, and the House eight years. Katherine Harris, a former congresswoman; Baxter Troutman, a state representative; and Sen. J.D. Alexander are all his grandchildren.

Alexander is also president and CEO of Atlanticblue, a real estate management company which owns the 65,000-acre Bluehead Ranch and controlling interest in ALICO, a land management company in Central and Southwest Florida which owns approximately 137,000 acres of land located in Collier, Glades, Hendry, Lee and Polk counties.

Q : The Florida Legislature shifted a chunk of the tax burden to local cities and counties. Was this a good or bad move? Please explain your answer.

The Legislature asked local governments to reduce property taxes and make difficult decisions to reduce local spending, and while some of the reductions in spending are necessary, at times the Legislature does not fully understand the costs some public policy initiatives have on our local governments. With the budget cuts that have been made and projected shortfalls, now is the time to review those decisions and reduce the costs to the taxpayers where possible, while also still taking into account the viability of small and rural counties and the need for all to reduce expenses.

Q: Do you believe Florida's environmental laws are adequate, inadequate, or too stringent?

I have always been a strong advocate for the preservation and

protection of Florida's environment and natural resources. Florida's natural resources should be protected and preserved for our children, their children and generations to come to be able to enjoy Florida's scenic beauty and outdoor activities, such as boating and fishing. I believe that the environmental laws currently in place are adequate to protect our environment; however, we must remain observant and aware of threats to our land and resources. If a situation arises where weaknesses in environmental laws will negatively impact the state of Florida and its citizens, those laws need to be strengthened.

Q: Is Florida's property tax system fair? If not, how would you change it? If so, make a case for why it's a fair system.

There are inequities in the property tax system that fall on some sectors of the population, such as small businesses and renters, for example. The Legislature took the first step to cap small business property tax increases at 10 percent annually. I had hoped to further limit these increases and will work to address this further.

I would look into changing the current system by looking at the presumption of correctness issue. I believe we need to give taxpayers a fair opportunity to challenge the appraisal of their property. I also support looking at the recapture rule so that in a time when property values are going down, people's assessments are not going up.

Q: Do you support Gov. Crist's deal with U.S. Sugar? Was it handled properly?

There are still too many questions that the governor and the South Florida Water Management District need to answer fully before proceeding with this deal. This deal has the potential to derail other environmental projects we currently have planned and, more importantly, there may be substantial job losses. Before I can support such a deal, these and other questions must be addressed. I have asked that the governor's proposed acquisition be debated in an open forum so that these and other pressing questions can be addressed.

Q: What can you do in the Legislature to keep home insurance rates low in the coming years?

Equitable rates in Citizens and returning competition to the private insurance market in Florida is an issue I intend to tackle head on.

Competition in the insurance market is the key to attaining low prices. We must work to bring insurers back into the state so they can offer policies at competitive rates. Our area has very few Citizens policies and no coastal homes, yet our homeowners and even our motorists are forced by Citizens to subsidize million-dollar coastal mansions because of their exposure to floods and hurricanes.

Equitable rates, a distribution of liability based on risk, and reducing our dependence on a state-run insurer are all vital to reducing rates and making sure our residents do not subsidize those in coastal communities and are not subject to the \$1,000 in premium taxes from unsound insurance policies.

Florida to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$1.75 billion

10/10/2008

Food Business News

Ron Sterk

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CLEWISTON, FLA. - Florida Governor Charlie Crist and United States Sugar Corp. chief executive officer Robert Buker yesterday announced an agreement under which the state would buy the company in a transaction valued at \$1.75 billion and shut it down in six years as part of the Everglades restoration project. A 'statement of principle' was signed June 24 and the transaction is expected to be completed by September.

The proposed agreement involves the public purchase of nearly 300 square miles of land (187,000 acres) as well as U.S. Sugar's assets, which include a state-of-the-art sugar mill, sugar refinery and citrus processing plant and 200 miles of railroad, according to the South Florida Water Management District, which will invest \$1.75 billion in cash and certificates of participation to finance the purchase.

U.S. Sugar is the nation's largest producer of sugar cane and refined cane sugar and one of Florida's major orange and orange products producers. 'Dependent upon weather, growing conditions and federal market allocations, U.S. sugar produces 700,000 tons of cane sugar a year, providing nearly 10% of the sugar produced in America,' the company's web site said. Its citrus company, Southern Gardens Citrus, owns one of the largest citrus groves in the United States with more than three million trees on 30,000 acres. The juice plant produces more than 120 million gallons of orange juice annually.

The agreement was announced prior to the start of the 2008 Serve to Preserve Florida Summit on Global Climate, which begins today in Miami. 'The proposal announced by Governor Crist is the right thing for the state of Florida and appears to be at a fair price for our shareholders,' U.S. Sugar said. The acquisition 'should allow remaining Everglades Agricultural Area farmers and the Everglades to be sustainable,' the company said. U.S. Sugar's holdings in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee is at the 'virtual hard of the ecosystem,' the company said. However, the agreement will not end sugar production in the Everglades since at least 250,000 acres of land used by other companies will remain in production, U.S. Sugar said. 'Although many of the details of the proposal need to be worked out, we expect to operate our business for at least a six-year transition period,' the company said. 'This will enable us to fulfill our long-term existing business obligations.' U.S. Sugar has about 1,700 employees. 'This is a bittersweet moment for a company that has been farming this land for more than four generations,' U.S. Sugar said.

= FOCUS US Sugar Growers Fear Low Returns, Not Bank Safety

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Oct 10, 2008 (Dow Jones Commodities News Select via Comtex) --
By Susan Buchanan

Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

U.S. sugar growers say any difficulties they may have with lenders during the U.S. credit crunch will likely result from low returns to production rather than the health of local banks.

"Louisiana growers could have some problems getting bank loans because of disappointing cane yields this season after two recent hurricanes -- Gustav and Ike," said Ben Legendre, cane expert at LSU AgCenter in Baton Rouge. "Prices received by cane producers remain low under the government sugar program. With weak yields and prices, "some growers won't have the collateral they'll need to obtain a bank loan."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture controls prices growers earn by limiting imports under a tariff-rate quota and restricting quantities that producers can sell. Producer prices have changed little in two decades and farmers are caught in a squeeze, shelling out much more for fuel, fertilizer, pesticides and labor these days.

Legendre said, however, that "most local banks in Louisiana are doing well and our economy is stronger than in many other states." Louisiana and Texas, which also grows cane, benefited from the recent surge in energy prices.

Miller Couse, president of First Bank of Clewiston, in the heart of Florida's Everglades cane area, said community banks in U.S. sugar regions and the nation as a whole "are mostly very strong and well capitalized, though of course it isn't 100% of them." First Bank, he said "is fully able to provide credit and we encourage borrowing." First Bank caters to growers and Florida is the top cane state.

But as a cane farmer himself, Couse said Florida producers are caught in a financial vise and looking to plant other crops, like vegetables. His family didn't want to cultivate cane this year until U. S. Sugar Corp. in Clewiston "for the first time decided to share profits on refined sugar with growers." That move made production worthwhile, since refined prices are running about twice raws -- partly because a section of Imperial Sugar's (IPSU) Savannah, Ga., refinery was destroyed by an explosion in February.

Legendre said Louisiana growers haven't been helped by higher refined prices, however. "Private companies and cooperatives here receive only prices quoted on the ICE domestic sugar market," which are hovering below 22 cents a pound, he noted. "Of course, when the new refinery in Reserve comes on line, raw mills within Louisiana Sugar Cane Products Inc. [LSCPI] will share in profits, which in turn will be shared with growers and landlords."

Cargill Inc. and partner LSCPI say they're about to start building the nation's largest sugar refinery in Reserve, La., to be completed in late 2010. Plans are to divvy costs and returns with local growers.

Other Producers Get Credit They Need

Barbara Miedema, spokeswoman for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, said the Belle Glade-based coop has had "little trouble obtaining financing because we have long-standing relations with strong lenders, like Cobank and Farm Credit of South Florida, along with several healthy, local banks."

CoBank, a Denver-based bank for cooperatives, has a AAA rating from Moody's and Standard & Poor's, and partners with Farm Credit Services banks -- which have also earned glowing ratings from Standard & Poor's.

David Berg, president of Minnesota-based American Crystal Sugar Co., the nation's biggest beet producer, said "various lending vehicles have gone up in cost, but credit's available and we've been able to get what was needed this fall. Growers here are paying off their debt at this time of year, and we haven't heard of any problems."

Community banks in Minnesota weren't involved in the sub-prime mortgage crisis and appear to be healthy, he said.

Ray VanDriessche, spokesman for Michigan Sugar Co. in Bay City, said he knew of no difficulties between beet growers and banks this fall. "Our producers cultivate four different crops in rotation, and many commodity prices are higher this year, so they shouldn't have much trouble with lenders," he noted. Corn, wheat and soybean prices retreated recently, but corn remains up from last fall.

U.S. beet growers have been allowed to share in profits on processed sugar to a greater extent than cane farmers, who have lately clamored for their part of the pie to make production viable, industry members said.

-By Susan Buchanan, Dow Jones Newswires; 504-371-5461 susan.buchanan@dowjones.com

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(Dow Jones Commodities News Select via Comtex) -- USGR | Quote | Chart | News | PowerRating -- By Susan Buchanan

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