

Sugar and water don't mix in the Everglades. New fight erupts over bill to change funding

February 10 2022, by Alex Harris, Miami Herald



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A bill changing state policy toward Everglades restoration, and pitting the Senate president's priorities against the governor's, advanced through its single committee stop Wednesday morning despite hours of

passionate protest from clean water advocates.

Dozens of fishing guides dropped their charters for the day—one captain estimated about \$40,000 in daily business was lost—and told the Senate Appropriations Committee they believed this bill would ruin water quality and their livelihoods by favoring [farmers](#)' interests over restoration.

"If you vote yes for this bill, you will single-handedly take away years of work to better our state," said Lee Richardson, a restaurant owner from Charlotte County. "Was that all smoke and mirrors? If you vote yes on this, I'll have my answer... You care more for the sugar industry than you do the tourists who keep coming here and powering our state."

The sponsor of SB 2508, which would change the way state agencies advocate for federal Everglades policy and affect the way state dollars are released for restoration projects, rebuffed all criticism and insisted the fishing guides were misled.

"Let me set the record clear, let's wipe away any smoke and lay aside any mirrors," said Sen. Ben Albritton, a Republican and citrus farmer from Bartow. "Asking for accountability from an agency that received 70% of its budget from the [state government](#)? That's good government."

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved the bill 16-4. The primary effect of the measure would be to force the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency that works most closely with the federal government on Everglades Restoration, to change its position and advocate for more water for agriculture users if it wants to receive [state funding](#) for restoration projects.

Water levels in Lake Okeechobee are controlled by the federal government through the Army Corps of Engineers, and in the past,

federal rules have forced the agency to send large blasts of that polluted water east and west, causing toxic and economically disastrous surges of blue-green algae.

That changed in 2017, when legislators passed Senate Bill 10 in response to the toxic algae blooms. The plan was to build a deep reservoir for holding polluted discharges from Lake Okeechobee on state-owned land south of the Everglades Agricultural Area.

For the last three years, the Corps has been working on a new set of rules that would reduce the amount of water it would have to send east and west by more than a third, and it would triple the amount of water sent south to recharge the thirsty Everglades and restore healthy conditions to Florida Bay, which many of the fishing guides depend on.

Senate president, governor on opposite sides

The water management district has publicly supported the direction the rules are headed in, which is not finalized yet, and said its priority is "balance" among all users. Those efforts have the support of Gov. Ron DeSantis, who appoints its board and who has made Everglades restoration a priority of his administration. The governor created a Blue-Green Algae Task Force to combat the toxic blooms and pushed for dedicating an unprecedented amount of state funds for the restoration and [water quality](#) efforts.

But the plan has come under fire from farmers in the Everglades Agricultural Area and Senate President Wilton Simpson, a Republican from Trilby who owns an egg farm and is running for agriculture commissioner.

The bill, sponsored by Albritton with the bipartisan support of Senate leadership, would require that in order to receive hundreds of millions of

dollars in state funding, the district must certify to the Senate and House that it officially recommends the Army Corps does not cut water levels to or "adversely affect" farmers.

The major farmers in the area in question are sugar cane and sugar beet producers, some of whom sued the federal government over this same issue last summer, arguing that the new reservoir would deprive them of the water they need for irrigation.

Florida's largest industrial farms are among the biggest contributors to the political campaigns of legislators in both parties. They have contributed more than \$5 million to legislators, their political committees and political parties for the 2022 election cycle.

The largest contributors were U.S. Sugar, which has given \$2.2 million to date, and Florida Crystals, which has donated \$2.1 million.

Everglades supporters speak out

Eric Eikenberg, head of the Everglades Foundation, told the committee that no member of the Senate or its staff attended any of the 30 public meetings over the last three years, making this bill the first time the Senate has weighed in, mere months before the process ends.

"This bill says if you do not convince the Army Corps of Engineers to put a security blanket back in for the sugar industry in LOSOM [Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual] then you cannot receive money for Everglades restoration," Eikenberg told the committee. "It would tie the hands of the water management district."

Chauncey Goss, chairman for the SFWMD, told senators that his agency was not consulted about this bill in advance and said he had "concerns," but when pressed by senators would not elaborate.

Another Everglades concern in Albritton's bill focuses on a controversial giant reservoir designed to hold tens of thousands of gallons of polluted Lake Okeechobee water, further reducing algae-causing discharges. DeSantis has called the Everglades Agricultural Area reservoir "a top priority" and recently picked a fight with the federal government for not funding its part of the project faster.

Dozens of business owners and fishing guides traveled to Tallahassee to appeal to senators to reject the new restrictions, warning that if the water flows are changed and algae blooms return, their businesses will be harmed. A hotel owner from Sanibel said the water crisis in 2018 cost him more than COVID-19 disruptions, only this time there was no federal funding or insurance policies to fill in the gap.

Procedural moves limit debate

One exception for the potential new requirement if the district wants state cash is the funding already carved out for the EAA and other priority restoration projects named in SB10.

Although the Senate version of the bill passed, it doesn't have a counterpart in the House, and it will become part of the budget negotiations.

But because Senate leaders chose to push through the change as a "conforming bill" to a Senate appropriation, rather than a policy bill that must receive extended debate and approval, lawmakers cannot amend it but only approve or reject it when it comes to a vote.

That decision should be a warning sign to senators, said Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, who voted against the bill. "It's almost unfathomable that we would move forward a piece of legislation without talking to the one group that predominantly it affects," he said, referring

to the [water](#) management district and governor's office.

The bill also includes provisions to switch more responsibilities and power to Florida's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which Simpson would control if he is elected, as well as provide additional funding for farmers.

Supporters of the bill included business and agricultural interests, including the Florida Chamber of Commerce and the Florida Native Growers and Landscapers Association. One of the rare voices in support during the marathon of public comment was Adam Basford, vice president of governmental affairs for Associated Industries of Florida, a lobbying group that gets hefty donations from the [sugar](#) industry.

"We believe this unprecedented level of funding should have accountability associated with it for the citizens and businesses of Florida," he said. "That accountability is crucial to businesses that are permitted legal users."

More important details

Two other important provisions of the bill that didn't get nearly as much attention as the Everglades portion include a change to environmental permitting and land protection.

The bill would allow the Department of Environmental Protection to potentially collect money in exchange for expediting environmental and wetlands permits, including for utilities whose projects involve a "public purpose," and ensuring those fast-tracked agreements would last at least three years.

"This would be absolutely not necessary if DEP were properly resourced and staffed to take over the wetlands process," said Eve Samples, head

of Friends of the Everglades. "This seems like the absolute wrong way to handle that backlog."

On the land-buying side, Albritton's bill would give the Department of Agriculture the power to outright buy land or development rights for environmental protection purposes, something the DEP usually handles. The [bill](#) would also allow those properties protected under state dollars to also sell off that protection for profit in the form of environmental mitigation credits.

"This is double-dipping and may result in less land being protected for wildlife habitats," said Lindsay Cross from Florida Conservation Voters.

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Citation: Sugar and water don't mix in the Everglades. New fight erupts over bill to change funding (2022, February 10) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-02-sugar-dont-everglades-erupts-bill.html>

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