



Friends *of the* Everglades

My name is Gil Smart and I'm Policy Director for Friends of the Everglades, founded by Marjory Stoneman Douglas in 1969 and based in Stuart.

Friends of the Everglades opposes 2508 due to the negative impact it would have on clean water, public health and our economy in Florida.

Specifically, we have three main concerns about this bill:

No. 1: It would lead to more toxic algae blooms on Florida's east and west coasts through mis-management of Lake Okeechobee. More on that in a moment.

Concern No. 2: It would delegate some wetland "dredge and fill" permit reviews to utility companies.

Does this mean FPL and Duke Energy could evaluate their own permit applications? This would not be necessary if DEP was properly staffed and resourced to take over the 404 wetland-permitting program in the first place.

No. 3: It picks winners and losers on Everglades funding. Language in this bill would bump up certain projects in the funding line, including the scientifically questionable Aquifer Storage and Recovery wells that are central to the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project.

So, back to concern No. 1.

How would this legislation lead to more toxic algae? By prioritizing irrigation for billionaire-backed sugarcane corporations over reducing harmful discharges to the east and west coasts.

Language in this bill forces the South Florida Water Management District to maintain existing, overly generous water-supply promises in the new Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual. Roughly 95 percent of Lake O's permitted water is allocated for EAA farmers.

The billionaire-backed sugarcane companies that control about half a million acres south of Lake O want insurance that the lake will never fall low enough to trigger water cutbacks. So, if this bill passes, the South Florida Water Management District would be required to certify to the President of the Florida Senate and Speaker of the Florida House that any recommendations as to how the lake is managed does not "diminish the quantity of water available to existing legal users," and would not "otherwise adversely impact existing legal users."

In other words, those who lay claim to the lake's water would see no adversity - while the estuaries, and the lake itself, get all of it.

If we keep more water in the lake than is necessary during the dry season, come the wet season the lake will fill up faster. High lake levels harm the ecology of the lake.

And it makes discharges to the St. Lucie, the Caloosahatchee and Lake Worth Lagoon more likely.

We know how this Lake O management scheme works because we've lived with it for more than a decade. In 2016, for example, more than 218 billion gallons of freshwater from Lake Okeechobee was discharged to the St. Lucie estuary. That's the same amount of water that takes a full 17 days to go over Niagara Falls.

We saw devastation again in 2018, when both the St. Lucie River and Caloosahatchee River were flooded with massive discharges carrying cyanobacteria-laden water from Lake O. That year thousands of tons of dead marine life washed ashore in Florida, as the Lake O-driven cyanobacteria commingled with red tide, crippling tourism. Toxins were aerosolized and detected in the nostrils of employees working near the algae blooms.

The Sanibel-Captiva Chamber of Commerce reported economic losses of approximately \$47 million in 2018 due to the algae crisis — and that was just one sliver of the impact.

If this bill, SB 2508, passes, make no mistake: We will be looking at another toxic-algae crisis.

In 2013, 2016 and again in 2018 our toxic algae crises became a national, even international news story, with people around the world wondering how Florida could let this happen.

So I'd put this question to those of you on this panel. Why would we let this happen again?

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