

• 'Glades plan may push sugar fields' pollution north •

# Cane coming our way?



Photographer: STEVEN R. M.

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**By Dan McCue**

*of the News staff*

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“It may be we’re not removing what has proven to be an environmental disaster for Florida at all,” said Dr. Brian E. LaPointe, a scientist at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution in Fort Pierce.

Several environmentalists and water managers interviewed last week agreed with LaPointe, but others were less critical of additional sugar cane fields coming to the Treasure Coast.

Some, in fact, say sugar could replace something they think is much more dangerous to the environment — cattle farms.

“From a pollution standpoint, cane is probably the most benign

Please see **CANE** on A4



Photogr

After the sugar cane is cut, it's loaded onto rail cars and taken to a processing plant.



# CANE

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crop that can be grown," said Nathaniel Reed, a former U.S. assistant secretary of the Interior and now a Hobe Sound resident. "So I'm not concerned about its pollution impacts on either Martin or St. Lucie County, especially if it's grown on former ranch lands, cattle lands, that have already been cleared, ditched and diked."

A major component of the \$8 billion Everglades restoration plan is the government's purchase of 250,000 acres of agricultural land, including 60,000 acres of sugar cane. After that happens, sugar company executives said last week, a number of farming operations probably will be moved north, encircling Lake Okeechobee with the reedy presence of sugar.

"It hasn't happened yet," said Charlie Lykes, executive vice president of Lykes Brothers, the agricultural powerhouse based in Tampa. "But certainly, if the market will support sugar cane farming as it is removed from the Everglades Agricultural Area south of the lake, it will go somewhere else."

"Martin, St. Lucie and Glades counties would seem to be likely alternatives."

Lykes Brothers is the state's oldest continuing family-owned business, started by Frederick Lykes in 1851. The company recently converted more than 200 acres of pasture next to the Brighton Indian Reservation, west of the lake, into sugar cane fields.

"The move was market-driven," Charlie Lykes said.

But, he added, nothing will impact the market as much as the Everglades restoration plan now before Congress.

## Restoration goals

Since it was conceived more than a decade ago, the restoration plan has had three main goals:

To restore some of the freshwater flow into what's left of the state's fabled "River of Grass."

To provide better flood control for communities south of the Kissimmee River basin, including Martin and St. Lucie counties.

To ensure that South Florida's growing population has enough fresh water.

Much of the effort will involve re-routing water systems created in the past 50 years by the Army Corps of Engineers and acquiring

artificially high level by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers," he said, "and why it gets too high after the annual rainy season, resulting in these massive releases of fresh water that foul the estuary."

Hearing that sugar might increase its presence here during the next several years, Henderson's voice grew tight. "Jesus," he said.

## Treasure Coast cane

Sugar cane has long been part of the agri-economy of the Treasure Coast, mainly through independent growers such as the Camayan Cattle Corp., which supplies its cane to Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar Corp., one of the biggest sugar-producing companies in the world.

In 1975, according to an analysis by the South Florida Water Management District, Martin County had about 3,000 acres under sugar cultivation.

Fueled by America's insatiable hunger for sugar and federal subsidies that took sugar profits to an all-time high, the amount of land under cane in Martin County more than doubled by 1984, and more than doubled again by 1988, peaking at about 14,600 acres.

The district's report, published in the spring of 1998, indicates the number of acres farmed by cane growers stabilized at nearly

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each county's estimate acreage separately, Martin County's numbers began to be rolled in with those of Palm Beach County, said Bob Blankenchip, media information specialist for the Florida Agricultural Statistic Service, a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The sugar corporations dictated the change, Blankenchip said. "I don't really know why it happened, but my guess is that it was a question of competition," he said. "You know, Macy's doesn't tell Gimbles what it's doing."

"By the same token, the sugar companies probably feel the same way. They don't want to reveal who their independent growers are. They don't want to reveal anything that would tip off the competition to how many acres they have or where they're allocated."

## Sugar's political strength

The political muscle of the sugar industry in Florida figures in everything from state elections to sponsoring major fund-raisers for President Clinton's campaigns.

It also has influenced how the industry's commercial efforts are accounted for, several officials said.

For instance, rather than reporting its activities directly to the state, where its records would be subject to Florida's open-records laws, the sugar industry reports to the USDA, where the information is covered by federal laws that include a number of privacy provisions.

Those numbers, collected by the Florida Agricultural Statistic Service, are then reported back, minus the details covered under the privacy clauses, to the Florida Department of Agriculture.

"Though figures like total acreage and gross receipts for the industry are useful for the press and fertilizer sales people and the like, there's nothing in the numbers I have that would reveal what someone is actually doing in Martin County," Blankenchip said.



A combine rolls through sugarcane behind, scavenging for what's left.



Corps of Engineers and acquiring hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland in the area south of Lake Okeechobee — the Everglades Agricultural Area — for use as stormwater retention areas.

The project is expected to take more than 20 years to complete.

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush is committed to providing the state's half of the project's cost, but neither the state nor the federal government has passed legislation for money to begin the work.

Harbor Branch's LaPointe, an outspoken critic of the restoration plan, blames "big sugar," a multibillion-dollar industry in South Florida, for many of what ails the Everglades region, particularly Florida Bay at the southernmost tip of the mainland. That area, he said, has been destroyed by nutrient-rich fresh water pumped through it from agricultural lands.

"If, as now seems inevitable, those ag lands are simply relocated to places like Martin and St. Lucie County, we may in fact be spending nearly \$8 billion to make it your problem rather than the Everglades'," LaPointe said.

Philip Baldwin, program director of the Florida Oceanographic Society, the Stuart group that monitors local water quality, said "the reasons this is a bad thing are endless, not the least of which is an increased demand on local water resources."

Kevin Henderson, vice president of the St. Lucie River Initiative, a Stuart-based citizens group working to clean up the St. Lucie River, said problems in the river, from lesioned fish to seasonally murky water, are results of Lake Okeechobee being maintained as a reservoir for agricultural interests to its south.

"That's why it's been kept at an

13,000 and probably will remain at that level until 2020. But no one takes those numbers seriously anymore.

"My feeling, and I have to admit I can't quantify it, is that we've got more like 17,000 acres of sugar cane in the county at present," said Paul Millar, director of the water district's Martin/St. Lucie County service center in Stuart.

Lending credence to Millar's estimate is Bob Buker, a senior vice president with U.S. Sugar.

"Without question," he said, "we have expanded our operations in both Glades and Martin County in recent years, mainly through independent growers who supply our mills with cane and through the conversion of former cattle pasture land to sugar cane."

"The land is good out there," Buker said, referring to the thin band of remnant Everglades muck — the preferred soil for sugar cane — that runs along both sides of Lake Okeechobee.

"The weather's good. We find that area quite hospitable to this kind of agriculture."

Officials at the water district, Martin County and even the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs admit they don't know how much sugar cane has come into the region since the Everglades restoration plan began to gain a committed following in Washington and Tallahassee.

That's because in 1998, just as the state and federal governments were completing one of the first major land purchases of the restoration effort, 45,000 acres in Palm Beach County, the method of accounting for sugar cane acreage abruptly changed.

After decades of reporting

U.S. SUGAR The latest figures he had, also from 1998, put total sugar cane production in South Florida at 447,000 acres, resulting in a gross income of more than \$472 million.

Most of that activity occurred in Palm Beach County. Blankenchip's most recent figures for Martin County, from 1997, put the county's cane production at about 13,000 acres, bringing in \$13.6 million.

According to Dr. John Dunkleman, vice president of agricultural research for the Florida Sugar Cane League, St. Lucie County probably will see much less new sugar than Martin County.

Right now, no sugar cane is reported to be growing there. Unlike Martin County, which butts up against Lake Okeechobee, St. Lucie County doesn't extend that far west, separated from the lake by a sliver of southern Okeechobee County.

"While I agree with the consensus that there is going to be some expansion, you have to remember it's going to be limited to some degree by the soils of the Treasure Coast region," Dunkleman said.

"The two biggest issues confronting any grower moving into the area is how to control water and nutrients."

### Cattle prices contribute

Although the Everglades restoration might be a driving factor behind sugar's migration to the basin ringing Lake Okeechobee, it's not the only factor.

It just happens that as the restoration project is beginning to move forward, this area is ripe for

An egret takes flight after hitching a ride on a tractor during sugar cane harvesting in Palm Beach County last week.



Photographer:  
STEVEN R. MARTINE





Photographer: STEVEN R. MARTINE

A combine rolls through sugar cane along a canal south of Port Mayaca last week. Egrets are close behind, scavenging for whatever the harvest turns up.



change.

The cattle market, which along with citrus groves is one of the twin pillars of agriculture here, has some of its worst prices ever, said Mary Ann Gosa, the Okeechobee-based assistant director of government affairs for the Florida Farm Bureau.

"The last several years, in fact, it's been real tough to stay in the cattle industry," she said. "It's not conducive to making a good living."

As a result, she said, cattle ranchers in Martin County and other communities around the lake have been looking for ways to diversify their businesses.

"Though citrus has rebounded recently, the region's other agricultural markets have not followed suit," Gosa said. "People are feeling they need to have more than one source of income to get by."

"While I haven't personally seen a large-scale movement toward sugar, I do know conversion of pastures to cane has occurred in isolated cases."

"Now, will it continue? Well, I don't have a crystal ball and I'm not an economist, but there has to be some kind of sucking sound, some kind of movement, when you take 250,000 acres out of agricultural production."

## Subsidies and Cuba

Nathaniel Reed, who after working in President Nixon's Cabinet served a lengthy tenure on the South Florida Water Management District board of directors, thinks the current lull in sugar's encroachment into Martin County is only temporary.

"As long as the sugar subsidy by the U.S. government remains as high as it is, there will unquestionably be a conversion of cattle land into sugar cane," Reed said.

"Now, there's some uncertainty in all this," he continued. "First of all, there's the question of how long Fidel Castro will remain in power in Cuba."

"It's an accepted fact that when he goes, willingly or unwillingly, Cuba will be granted extensive import quotas at the expense of cane growers here."

"The other open question is whether the United States Congress will reduce or even eliminate the 'guarantee' it currently grants the sugar industry, which is in fact a subsidy."

"However, until those things happen, I have no doubt sugar will migrate from the worn-out lands of the Everglades Agricultural Area to the western

reaches of Martin and St. Lucie counties."

Charlie Lykes would not say how much land his company has converted into sugar cane fields.

"I would prefer to keep information about the size and scope of our farming activities confidential," he said.

Ten years ago, Lykes Brothers was forced to pay a \$405,000 fine after a ranch foreman ordered the digging of 22 miles of canals in wetlands on the Glades County property without a permit.

**"We've already seen what some of those impacts are. We've seen the lesioned fish outbreaks, a massive sea grass die-off in the estuary, and increased development of harmful algae blooms."**

**DR. BRIAN E. LAPOINTE  
HARBOR BRANCH**

A decade later, the company has been the picture of corporate responsibility during the conversion process, said John Morgan, director of the South Florida Water Management District's Okeechobee Service Center.

"Lykes Brothers has a lot of things going on — cattle, citrus, sugar — and the way one of their permits, known as a works-of-the-district permit, works is any time they change a land use, they simply have to inform us of that change," Morgan said.

"At the same time, because they are moving into needing more irrigation water for this property, they were also required to get an environmental resources permit and a consumptive use permit."

"These take into consideration drainage, possible impacts to wetlands, avoiding impacts to wetlands, and water usage. Throughout this process, I have to say, they've been very good about keeping us informed of their activities."

Morgan said he too has noticed sugar migrating north around the lake, and like Reed said, it doesn't particularly concern him.

"Frankly, from a water management perspective, we don't care so long as they don't increase the amount of phosphorus going into Lake Okeechobee," he said.

"Basically, what our standards

say is, if you're converting cattle lands, whatever you convert the lands to shouldn't make the water around it any dirtier."

"It's a pretty easy standard to meet."

## Nitrogen problem

That's just what LaPointe, the Harbor Branch scientist, does not want to hear.

An expert on the effects of nutrient loading in natural water bodies, LaPointe contends it's not excessive amounts of phosphorus that have destroyed large stretches of the coral reefs in Florida Bay in recent years, it's excessive concentrations of nitrogen — the very nutrient cane fields thrive on.

"Essentially, two things have happened as a result of sugar cane production in the Everglades Agricultural Area," he said. "The historic muck soil of the Everglades has oxidized as a result of prolonged exposure to air, releasing nitrogen

held within it, and the fertilizer used to strengthen the plants has also added a tremendous amount of nitrogen to the environment."

"When it rains or when they increase the flow of water through the area, it dumps all that nitrogen into the bay, effectively wiping out everything in its path."

As sugar cane production is moved north, LaPointe contends, the same effects will occur in the St. Lucie Estuary and Indian River Lagoon.

"We've already seen what some of those impacts are," the scientist said. "We've seen the lesioned fish outbreaks, a massive sea grass die-off in the estuary, and increased development of harmful algae blooms."

"My feeling is, if this trend, if this movement north continues, there's no question we'll see further degradation to an estuarine system that's already been pretty heavily damaged by increased freshwater outflows from Lake Okeechobee."

To Charlie Lykes, any such talk is premature to say the least.

"As far as the restoration goes, they really haven't removed much land from the Everglades Agricultural Area, and so it's hard to say how much of an impact it's going to have," he said.

"What I do know is there's a lot of land on their wish list, and in the long run that could shift a fair amount of cane to Martin and St. Lucie counties."