

AG Commissioner Putnam Wants “Bold Water Policy Now.”

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Jason
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Jason Totoiu has an article in the Sun. Dec. 6 *Gainesville Sun* about how state officials have failed to follow the law in protecting the state’s water. They have allowed the ecosystems to be damaged significantly and the solutions which Commissioner Putnam touts, the “best management practices,” are too little and too late.

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Jason Totoiu: Follow law in protecting water as public resource



Thunderstorms loom in the distance over a an area of spike rush growing in Lake Okeechobee.

Ernst Peters/The Ledger

By Jason Totoiu

Special to The Sun

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Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam's Oct. 11 column, "The time for bold water policy is now," correctly identified the need for a comprehensive, statewide approach to sustain our long-term water quality and water supply. Thankfully, Florida law provides a strong foundation for the protection and management of our water resources based on the fundamental principle that water is a public resource. The law, however, is only as good as its implementation and enforcement.

The Water Resources Act was passed in 1972 following a special water conference convened by the late Gov. Reubin Askew, who declared a water crisis amid water shortages, saltwater intrusion into well fields, and fires in the Everglades.

Fast-forward more than 40 years. Despite the act's creation of

regional water management districts, which are responsible for setting minimum flows and levels to protect our state's waters from significant harm, and establishing water reservations to protect fish and wildlife, our state is experiencing a second crisis. Excessive water consumption is depleting our aquifers, the absence of consistent clean water flows is causing toxic algae blooms in our springs, estuaries and bays, and not enough water flows south to restore America's Everglades.

What went wrong? Key protections of our water law have not been implemented. In many cases, water managers failed to quantify the water needs of the natural system when the law was enacted. Now they are faced with the difficult task of restoring ecosystems damaged by over-allocation of water and preventing future harm, while seeking to make even more water available to meet the growing needs of our state's residents and businesses.

Florida missed an opportunity to implement key protections before and we cannot afford to miss the same opportunity again. Water managers must quantify both the needs of the natural system and the amount of water available for human consumption at sustainable levels. They must also expeditiously develop and implement water reservations and minimum flows and levels to ensure that future allocations will not cause even greater stress to our surface waters and aquifers. Further, lawmakers have a tremendous opportunity with the passage of Amendment 1 to help solve our state's water crisis by funding land acquisition to assist in meeting our restoration needs.

While Commissioner Putnam celebrates improvements, the partial mitigation of significant, longstanding harm does not equate with real success. For example, Putnam lauds the use of best management practices even though much more is needed to address pollution flowing into Lake Okeechobee.

In 2001, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection established a limit for phosphorus inflows and set a target date of Jan. 1, 2015 to achieve it. That date has come and gone and the inflow of phosphorus is nearly four times higher than the established limit.

For Lake Okeechobee, we need an implementation plan with five-year milestones, clear measurable performance markers and state agencies that ensure these milestones are met. Best management practices alone are not enough if they do not put us on a path toward meeting the environmental standards based on the best science.

Commissioner Putnam is right, in that water is “Florida’s goose” and the time to act is now. We can solve our state’s water crisis through collaboration, innovation and sound planning if we learn from our past mistakes, optimize our existing laws to protect our natural systems, and always treat our state’s precious water supplies as public resources, as the Water Resources Act requires.

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