

Gaston Cantens: Face the facts ... and don't blame 'Sugar' for all the St. Lucie River problems

By Gaston Cantens, guest columnist , Treasure Coast Newspapers

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The recent column by Rich Campbell ("Not-so-sugar-coated advice for Ed Ciampi," Sept. 25) is a great example of not allowing facts to get in the way of a good story — a novel that is.

It is unfortunate environmental and other interest groups have distorted the facts about the sugar industry and its supposed impact on the Everglades, thereby neglecting the development of real solutions.

Sugar farmers in the agricultural areas south of Lake Okeechobee accept responsibility for the fact we farm in an environmentally sensitive area between the lake and the Everglades.

We have been extremely successful in resolving issues that relate to our farming activities and their impact on the natural system.

Notwithstanding our success, and the scientific documentation of that success, we are blamed for nearly every environmental problem that surfaces in South Florida.

Allow me to share some facts that you can easily verify:

FACT: Hundreds of square miles north of the lake have been drained to allow economic uses of the land north of the lake. That water flows into the lake.

FACT: The Flood Control Project in Central Florida manages the lakes north of Lake Okeechobee and the Kissimmee basin several feet below historical levels. The area must be constantly drained south to the lake, so developments from Orlando south do not flood.

FACT: Almost 98 percent of the water flowing into Lake Okeechobee comes from the northern watershed.

FACT: Water entering the lake from the northern tributaries can range as high as 600 parts per billion phosphorous. The lake itself averages nearly 250 ppb.

FACT: In contrast, farm water from the Everglades Agricultural Area south of the lake is the cleanest source of water available to the lake or the Everglades, at 80 ppb phosphorus. And that's before the Storm Water Treatment Areas, built on former farmlands, further filter it.

FACT: A huge “mud zone” of organic sediment exists in the eastern third of the lake ranging southward to a point just west of the lock that sends water east to the St. Lucie River. This sediment has accumulated over several decades and is fed by the high phosphorus in the inflow from the north. Wind events, especially hurricanes, stir up this sediment, which leaves the lake during the water releases to the St. Lucie canal.

It should be obvious to impartial, fact-based observers that the quantity and quality of water discharged to the estuaries is due to activities taking place north of the lake and has nothing to do with sugar farmers to the south.

Unfortunately, irresponsible journalism and political rhetoric has overtaken reason and the truth and has stymied the conversation about real solutions.

The harsh reality is until facts take precedent over fiction, dirty water will continue to sully the lake and neither the Everglades nor the St. Lucie basin will ever see any benefits or relief.

Cantens is vice president of Florida Crystals Corp.