

Keeping the Everglades Flowing

Developer Ronald M. Bergeron Sr. spends much of his time campaigning for his version of Everglades restoration and preservation. The influential political supporter has the ear of the US Army Corps of Engineers and key legislators in Washington and Florida. Bergeron recently answered some questions posed by SouthFloridaCEO.

Why is Everglades preservation so important to you?

Florida enjoys the distinction of having one of the planet's largest ecosystems located within its boundaries. Our state is defined by the magnificence and marvels of the Everglades. In 1949, our forefathers drew lines. They said, inside the lines would be preserved forever, and outside would be drained for agriculture and development purposes. We have now drained the area and developed from seagrass to sawgrass. Fortunately, our forefathers set aside 3 million acres for preservation, which is about half of South Florida, which supplies our drinking water, and I think it's extremely important to the quality of life of everyone in South Florida.

What should be the priority in terms of preserving the Everglades?

Attention to the quantity of water and the length of time water is held in the Everglades by control structures is the greatest priority. Having lived my entire life in the Everglades, I have seen the devastation that has caused to the wildlife and the ecology in the Everglades. Understand that when we experience an act of God, such as a flood that you might expect once every 100 years, the weak die and the strong survive. That is the natural cycle of life — survival of the fittest. But when man alters the duration of the effects of a 100-year act of God, for example, by retaining water in a wetland for an extended and unnatural period of time, the damage to the wildlife and ecology is irreversible.

I have witnessed two devastating events since the mid-1980s which have depleted the fur-bearing animal population and have diminished the vegetation of the Everglades. On both occasions, water was held back in the Everglades by man-made structures for a longer period of time than nature would have intended. As a result,

we have a waning population of deer and diminishing tree islands.

You have said the key to mitigating water quantity damage is 'shared adversity' among the state-owned Everglades, the Big Cypress Preservation and the federal Everglades National Park. What does that mean?

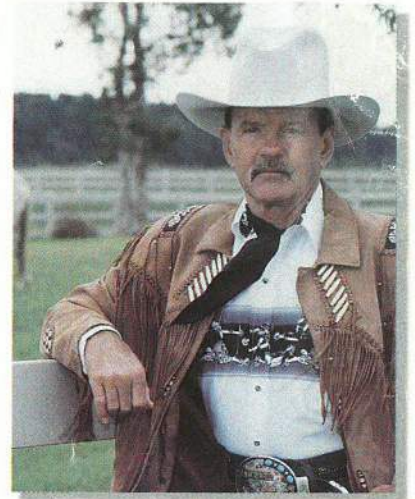
Each of the three areas must share the adverse effects of catastrophic events equally. Water must be permitted to drain to the ocean with minimal intervention by any of the three jurisdictions. ... In an effort to equalize the adverse effects among the three sections of the Everglades, I advocate providing more drainage under the Tamiami Trail through box culverts so that the water from the Everglades can naturally flow by gravity where it flowed before the existence of Tamiami Trail: through the Everglades and out to the ocean. This would improve the sheet flow and would provide immediate relief to all 3 million acres that make up the Everglades.

Everglades restoration plans call for draining excess water into reservoirs, for drinking water. But you think we should let that water go?

We have to constantly manage the water levels and ... release water until we have the reservoirs outside of the Everglades. Building reservoirs to store water as a resource is wonderful. Until we have these components, we have to be willing to release the water.

Have you had any success getting the various Everglades regulatory bodies to address water flows?

As a businessman, I have always been able to form consensus to achieve my objectives. Similarly, I have been working to form consensus between the various governmental agencies in order to heighten awareness of the magnitude of



RONALD M. BERGERON Sr.
CEO, BERGERON FAMILY OF COS.

the quantity of water issue. Last year, we had four hurricanes with no negative impact due to the bringing together of the federal government and the state. They released water out the nine avenues; that water went out before man entered and restricted flows, allowing sheet flow not to be restricted under the Tamiami Trail.

What about water flow restrictions designed to protect particular endangered species?

I am philosophically opposed to the single-species protection approach. In 75 years, there have been very few success stories resulting from this approach. In most cases, single-species protection creates additional endangered species.

Why are you qualified to advocate for such complex structural changes?

Being an engineering contractor, I have the technical background in regards to the issues of sheet flow and conveyance and quantity of water issues. And I can apply the technical aspects to the real life.

And those who say that developers have created the current Everglades situation?

The development that has occurred in Broward County is within the area of the county that was intended to be developed. The real conflict is between using the Everglades to store water or allowing the Everglades to thrive as a wetland. You cannot do both. Much of the Everglades Restoration project is intended to provide for water storage in reservoirs in order to provide relief to the Everglades.