

Bullsugar * Center for Biological Diversity * Everglades Trust * Florida Defenders of the Environment * Florida Wildlife Federation * National Parks Conservation Association * Reef Relief Sanibel Captiva Conservation Foundation * Sierra Club * Sierra Club Broward Group

March 28, 2018

Senator Jeanne Shaheen
506 Senate Hart Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Virginia Foxx
2252 Rayburn Building
Washington DC 20515

Senator Patrick Toomey
511 Senate Hart Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Danny Davis
2159 Rayburn Building'
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Support Sugar Policy Modernization Act for Everglades Health

Dear Senators and Representatives:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, which are committed to the health and restoration of America's Everglades, **we write in support of the Sugar Policy Modernization Act** that you have introduced in both houses of Congress.

Sugar Policy Modernization Act and the Everglades

The Everglades is a globally unique ecosystem, vast and diverse. Providing the water supply to over eight million Floridians, the Everglades region is vital to the health of our state's ecology, economy, and the quality of life that makes Florida beloved to residents and tourists alike.

While there are certainly other factors in play, mass production of sugarcane in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of Lake Okeechobee remains a great impediment to efforts by federal and state agencies to restore the Everglades through implementation of the congressionally authorized Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). Working around sugar interests has come at a much greater expense of both time and taxpayers' money.

We are not advocating for the removal of sugarcane in the EAA. Rather, we ask that balance be restored to give the Everglades and our coastal estuaries a fighting chance. This Act provides that balance.

The Federal Sugar Program

Originally introduced in 1934, among other things, the U.S. Sugar Program directs the Secretary of Agriculture to set the domestic price of sugar at a rate that is two or more times higher than the world price of sugar. As a result, American consumers and taxpayers have lined the pockets of sugar companies through a network of policies that unfairly favor one industry at the expense of many others.

The sugar industry has used this windfall to fund political candidates, campaigns, consultants, law firms, and lobbying efforts in Tallahassee and Washington to monopolize water and drainage in the EAA, and to force taxpayers to bear the costs of cleaning up its pollution. The political power this program has given to sugarcane producers continues to wreak havoc on our state's tourism, fishing, and real estate economies that depend on clean water, which is blocked, diverted and muddied by the industry's practices and stranglehold on policymakers.

Among the big commodity groups, sugar interests consistently outspend every other agriculture commodity PAC in congressional contributions. In Florida, these expenditures are enabling the destruction of a national park and world heritage site, while severely undermining federal and state Everglades restoration efforts. This past August, the Tampa Bay Times reported one Florida sugar lobbyist had signed a contract for an additional \$300,000 to lobby Congress and the President this year for the continuation of the status quo ¹

While it is impossible for environmental, sportfishing, and water-related industries to compete with this level of political contribution and high-powered lobbying capacity, we do have the support of millions of members in our communities to speak up for what is fair and right for Florida's economy, drinking water supply, and environment.

There is another major issue resulting from the massive sugar production on almost 500,000 acres in the EAA just south of Lake Okeechobee. For many years, sugar producers in Florida have pumped phosphorous-laden water from their fields into Lake Okeechobee. While there are other culprits, the phosphorous predominantly from sugar fields continues to generate toxic blue-green algae (bacteria) in the lake. When the lake gets too high, because that water cannot move south as intended, it is forced unnaturally into major estuaries east and west of the lake. Not only does this toxic bacteria harm and kill wildlife, it has been shown to create health ranging from irritated skin and nausea to degenerative nerve diseases. A 12-year study released by Ohio State University last year linked toxic algae to liver disease in the affected region in Florida ².

Opportunity for Sugar Policy Reform

The 2008 Farm Bill included a program that requires the government, if sugar prices fall below guaranteed levels, to buy surplus sugar and then sell that sugar to ethanol companies, typically at a loss to taxpayers. In practice, the program incentivizes the industry to grow more and be guaranteed a hefty profit even if that production outpaces the market.

Now a decade later, the Sugar Policy Modernization Act will be offered to correct the longstanding privilege extended to sugar industries by the Federal government. The Act will **not** repeal the sugar price support program or quota limits on foreign sugar entering the United States. Rather, it will loosen the very tight controls on sugar production. This long-awaited legislation will make the Federal sugar program more oriented to the free market and in line with the type of fair competition we expect of other industries. It will reduce the taxpayer-funded political influence currently harming government and public interests.

We join the growing number of stakeholders in urging your colleagues to take action against the longstanding advantage offered to the sugar industry by supporting the Sugar Policy Modernization Act of 2017, amending the 2018 Farm Bill. Thank you for your continued efforts.

Sincerely,

Peter Girard

Bullsugar

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Center for Biological Diversity

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Everglades Trust

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Florida Defenders of the Environment

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1) Brian Ballard's Washington firm lands another big lobbying contract. Tampa Bay Times, August 2017.

2) Feng Zhang, Jiyoung Lee, Song Liang, and CK Shum. Cyanobacteria blooms and non-alcoholic liver disease: evidence from a county level ecological study in the United States. Environmental Health 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12940-015-0026-7>