

Restoring the Everglades Agricultural Area

Rachael: For years, the **Everglades Agricultural Area** has drawn much controversy over the environmental concerns regarding water quality in South Florida. Stuck in the middle of that controversy is agriculture. Florida Farm Bureau's Gary Ritter shares some of the challenges that farmers and ranchers are facing in the EAA. (EAA INTRO)

Gary: "The challenges today's EAA farmers and ranchers face are linked hand in hand to the storied history of the Everglades, their partnership in Everglades Restoration and population growth.

This all started back in 1994 Florida Passed the Everglades Forever Act mandating EAA farmers meet a 25% reduction in phosphorus through the implementation of on-farm BMPs. For the past 25 years EAA farmers have met or exceeded their 25% reduction goal averaging 55% reductions during that time period and this past year a 70% reduction.

Rachael: What are some of the techniques that farmers and ranchers have in place to help in the Everglades Restoration?

Gary: Farmers use Best Management Practices in three categories: Water Management, Nutrient Management and Sediment Controls. Let's take a look at all three.

Water conservation and management practices are implemented to retain runoff by optimizing on-site storage, based on rainfall levels.

Nutrient management through soil testing includes uniform applications of fertilizer with soil amendments at the plant root zones while maintaining setbacks from waterways.

Sediment controls reduce erosion of canal banks and swales by maintaining vegetative buffers. In addition crop rotations and rice production has helped improve soil loss in the EAA area.

Rachael: Gary helps dispel some of the myths regarding the phosphorus levels of the Everglades.

Gary: The myths are generally from a misinformed public that believes water from EAA farms is back pumped into Lake Okeechobee and somehow winds up in the coastal estuaries. Actually, farmers in the EAA treat water from Lake Okeechobee sending it south into the water conservation areas.

Rachael: How important is it to understand other contributors to the health of the Everglades?

Gary: Farmers have been a partner in the restoration effort for decades. However success truly means all of south Florida has to be united and engaged with our farmers...this means citizens and industry along with the state of Florida and the Federal Government."

Rachael: This is Rachael Smith for Florida Farm Bureau Newslines.