



Guest Opinion: Mark Wilson

Lake Belt Plan balances needs of people, nature Rock mining, 'Glades buffer combined

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The State of Florida is to America what America is to the rest of the world, a land of natural wonder, economic opportunity, and freedom. Because of our enviable quality of life, our population and our economy have grown. With this success comes the challenge of protecting the quality of life that brought us here — and keeps us here.

Among these challenges are policy decisions that require striking the appropriate balance between helping our economy and protecting our natural environment. Some believe that you have to sacrifice one to accomplish the other. We believe that they are intrinsically linked.

That is why we must work to create “win-win” policies that benefit both nature and our economy. Florida already has an impressive list of win-win policies, including the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, Babcock Ranch preservation, strong growth management laws, and laws protecting our water resources. These successes have something in common: They brought together diverse interests to establish a long-term plan to benefit nature, the economy, and the people of Florida.

In Southeast Florida, there is another example of building a consensus around a long-term plan. It is called the Miami-Dade Lake Belt Plan. It combines a blueprint for limestone rock mining and the creation of a large natural buffer between development and the Florida Everglades. The Lake Belt Plan advances our economic and environmental priorities simultaneously.

Since the 1950s, mining companies in the Lake Belt have operated responsibly and safely. Nearly 60 years of data proves that Lake Belt mining can coexist with nature and protection of our water resources. These are the most important rock-mining operations in all of Florida and they are critical for building roads, highways, schools, hospitals, businesses, and homes. Nearly half the materials used to build roads in the entire peninsula of Florida come from the Miami-Dade Lake Belt, as well as the material needed for a quarter of Florida's concrete.

The Lake Belt Plan — supported by both the late Governor Chiles and former Governor Bush — brought mining companies, community leaders and environmental groups together to develop a long-term plan. The plan allows for continued mining in northwest Miami - Dade County, an area that has been mined for over a half century. In return, the mining companies pay a Lake-Belt mining fee which is used by the state to buy land to create a 2-mile-wide natural buffer to protect the Everglades. Additionally, mined lands will be turned into water reservoirs needed for regional water management including Everglades restoration, or used for environmentally-friendly recreational purposes.

These environment benefits are why only one out of the three environmental group representatives on the Lake Belt Planning Committee voted against the plan. Unfortunately, that group filed a federal lawsuit challenging permits under the Lake Belt Plan. As a result, nearly a third of the mining acreage has been shut down, and the rest could soon follow.

This litigation threatens both Florida's economy and environment. According to the Florida Department of Transportation, a shut -down of Lake Belt mining would cause every FDOT road construction project between Key West and Vero Beach to grind to a halt, along with a majority of FDOT projects throughout the rest of Florida. State economists also estimate that even if just 5 percent of the Lake Belt production is lost, it will cost

Florida's economy 24,627 jobs, \$950 million in labor income, and \$2.5 billion in economic output. Economic impacts of this magnitude would be devastating in the best economy. In leaner economic times, they could be catastrophic.

A mining shut-down also stops the collection of Lake Belt mining fees, taking away the money needed by the State to buy land to create the 2-mile buffer for the Everglades, and imperiling the consensus that took years to forge.

The case is currently being appealed, and the final outcome is critical to Florida's future. It is our hope that the spirit of the Lake Belt Plan — which created a win-win policy for Florida's economy and Florida's environment — will prevail.

—Mark Wilson is executive vice president for the Florida Chamber of Commerce.
