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Brian Gleason column

: Big Sugar battles bad guy image



With Congress at work on a sweeping farm bill that will have far-reaching implications for its business for years, Big Sugar is on the offensive. It's not a new posture for the industry (comprised in Florida of Flo-Sun, U.S. Sugar and a growers co-op), but in addition to a multimillion-dollar war chest and dozens of lobbyists, it now has something else in its arsenal: results.

Some background: Florida's sugar industry is based south of Lake Okeechobee in an area known as the Everglades Agricultural Area. Sugarcane is grown on about 370,000 acres of the 700,000-acre EAA, down from 570,000 acres, according to Judy Sanchez, director of corporate communications for U.S. Sugar. While the area has been farmed since the turn of the century, the EAA was formally created in the late 1950s.

Extensive farming and a network of irrigation and stormwater drainage canals led to the pollution of the Everglades, with the primary culprit being runoff of phosphorus-rich sediment. The Everglades Forever Act was passed by the Florida Legislature in 1994. It was following in 2000 by the state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program, an \$11.9 billion cleanup effort. (Congress has failed to appropriate its share, as the 2000 water bill still has not been approved.)

