

Viewpoint: Economic study was too optimistic



Craig Wheeling

In 2002, the State of Florida funded an extensive economic study of Miami-Dade County agriculture. This \$500 million study examined economic trends in Dade crops and looked at factors affecting the profitability and sustainability of Miami-Dade agriculture. A wide spectrum of local growers provided data for the study.

The study, completed by the University of Florida, came to the following conclusions:

"Most of the current and emerging issues identified by respondents are complex and interrelated, and not solvable by individual entrepreneurs or even within the confines of the agricultural community. Many of these problems are the result of national or state policies and international agreements. Policy decisions made at these levels are usually much more difficult to influence than those made locally."

The study further suggested that South Dade farmers should be politically active, but warned, "Proponents and opponents of various issues have included and will include in the future elected national, state, and local officials, bureaucrats from regulatory agencies at all levels of government, and citizens' groups of every description. This strategy is not foolproof, however, because political decisions are frequently influenced by the numbers of constituents involved."

The University of Florida study further states that "recent experience with NAFTA and efforts to address the concerns of producers of

import-sensitive U.S. agricultural commodities in the House Bill supporting Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) suggests that U.S. agricultural trade policy is driven by the interests of major grain-exporting states, with little regard for U.S. producers of import-sensitive agricultural products."

How did the professors at the University of Florida do as forecasters? My belief is that they were way too optimistic. The actual performance of government toward Miami-Dade County agriculture has been even worse than their dismal forecasts.

I offer the following examples:

The state/federal effort to eliminate citrus canker. The program that started with the detection of a single infected tree in 1995 has had costly results for both the taxpayer and the grower. Spending is nearing \$850 million for the destruction of 11 million commercial trees, and American growers have lost virtually the entire U.S. lime industry. As thousands of additional acres are being threatened further north, members of the citrus industry are finally questioning the wisdom of the program.

The \$11.5 billion, forty-year Everglades Restoration Project. Studies are made, conferences are attended and cool acronyms are invented. So far the winners have been the consultants, the lawyers, and the federal bureaucrats. Little dirt has been moved, yet the key problem of flooding in South Dade, which has been an issue since 1981 and was the subject of major federal legislation in 1989, is still of concern to Dade growers.

Crop insurance. Pursuant to government policies to substitute crop insurance for outright post-disaster government grants, the Florida avocado industry requested effective federal

windstorm insurance for trees. This is a noble goal that is far from having been reached in the intervening thirteen years. Instead, consultants have been hired, studies have been completed, and two rounds of Congressional letters have been sent and answered. Still there is no effective Florida avocado industry insurance policy.

Mango Promotion Board. In late 2002, the USDA initiated a proposal to tax the U.S. mango industry to fund the promotion of mangos. OK so far, but now who decides how the money paid by U.S. growers would be spent? Incredibly, a board consisting largely of foreign mango producers and importers has been given the purse strings. The stupidity of the idea didn't prevent it from being made into U.S. law. The Mango Promotion Board is now functioning; however, the Florida mango industry is not.

The Miami-Dade County Agricultural Retention Study. The scope of work for this study was originally drafted in 1996. As I write this today (ten years later), the consultant's findings have still not been delivered to the Dade County Commission. This may be understandable given that the county's Citizens Advisory Board voted to reject the study with prejudice largely because of a lack of required economic analysis.

The Farm Bureau. The good folks at the Farm Bureau work hard to protect your interests. However, they are facing an uphill battle that could be better fought if the Florida congressional delegation was represented on one or more House or Senate agriculture committees. Our congressional delegation instead chooses to work on more urban-oriented committees, with the exception of agriculture's good friend, Congressman Allen Boyd, who is

Continued on page 5

'Farmers need to be more politically active'

on an agriculture-related appropriations committee.

With this lack of representation, is it any surprise that Florida growers were largely cut out of funding under the 2005 Agriculture Hurricane Recovery Act? Instead, hurricane aid for Florida agriculture is actually coming from decades-old USDA programs.

The situation is not completely bleak. Thanks to the efforts of our Farm Bureau, the state has eliminated the sales tax on powered farm equipment. Paul DiMare has done yeoman's work in the field of fair trade, farm workers' housing and country-of-origin labeling. Brooks Tropicals has won victories on items such as compensation for lime trees destroyed by the federal / state citrus canker eradication program.

Conclusion. The study completed by the University of Florida was optimistic. What can be done to provide the needed support? South Miami-Dade County farmers need to become more politically active.

Attendees at political fundraisers can change the process demanding question-and-answer sessions and not just canned political speeches. During these question-and-answer sessions, we need to pointedly ask the local, state, and federal office seekers where they have stood on these issues in the past. This will give us an indication of their continuing level of support while giving the politician an indication of what they need to do to get our financial support.

Our elected friends need to do better in the future. We need to do better in

letting them know how we can be better supported, or we are in for very tough times ahead.

CRAIG WHEELING is the CEO of Brooks Tropicals, the nation's largest grower, packer, and shipper of tropical fruits. Craig is a fourth-generation Dade County farmer who has been chairman of the Advisory Committee to the County on the Agricultural and Rural Area Study, chairman of the Agricultural Practices Board, and chairman of the Federal Avocado Marketing Order Committee. He can be contacted at (305) 247-3544 or craigw@brookstropicals.com

CSOP Committee reaches consensus



Tom MacVicar

The Combined Structural Operating Plans Advisory Team has reached a tentative conclusion to its two year effort to advise the federal Everglades Restoration Task Force on a set of recommendations for the C-111 and Modified Water Delivery Projects. The most important issues for the south Miami-Dade rural communities are the sizing of the S-356 pump station to be located at Tamiami Trail, and the use of the C-111 impoundments in the Rocky Glades during wet periods.

The Advisory Team reached the unanimous conclusion that the S-356 pump station should have a capacity of at least 950 cubic feet per second (425,000 gallons per minute). This is almost double the size the Corps anticipated at the beginning of the process. The pump

will prevent the unwanted diversion of flow from the Park into south Dade during the wet season.

The C-111 impoundments, located west of the L-31N canal, have been partially constructed and, when complete, will allow better flood protection for south Dade without causing harm to Everglades National Park. The Committee recommended that the Corps maximize the use of the buffer and consider adjustments that lower canal levels based on surface water levels in the Rocky Glades.

This is not to say that the agencies have reached complete agreement on the fine points of how the project should be operated to balance the benefits to the Everglades areas north of Tamiami Trail and the areas to the south in the National Park. The debate is still simmering on that topic. However the items most critical to south Dade are at least on the right path and, if the consensus can be

held together through the final federal approvals and then the construction and operation phases, the conflicts over flood protection for south Dade should be minimized in the future.

The Federal task Force has agreed that the CSOP Advisory Team should meet one more time to review the final plan recommended by the Corps, which should happen early in 2006. If the final plan can preserve the present consensus among the Advisory Team prospects are good for a successful completion, twenty-five years after it started, of the effort to improve water management in south Miami-Dade County and Everglades National Park.

TOM MACVICAR is the president of MacVicar, Frederico & Lamb, Inc. Water Resource & Environmental Consulting. He can be reached at (561) 689-1708 or tom@mfl-inc.com.