



BY GARY COOPER

A blast from the past

Saving what, for whom, for how much?!

By Gary Cooper
of Southeast AgNet



I wrote a column for Citrus Industry magazine 16 years ago. This was before Southeast AgNet Radio Network bought the magazine in 2005, as the company began to diversify toward becoming the multimedia business (AgNet Media) it is today. I had been a regular columnist for years, but a copy of this particular column has been pinned to the wall of my fishing cabin to share with visitors ever since I wrote it in 2003.

It's uncanny to see the similarities of issues then that we're still dealing with today. Consider the topic of environmental protection and how Florida leads the deep south-east in urban growth and debates about its unintended consequences to agriculture.

With state legislative sessions now underway, I thought this blast-from-the-past column would be fitting to share with a new generation of readers. As many things continue to change in our region, some things remain the same. Here is the original column from 2003:

Saving what, for whom, for how much?!

Inauguration Day in Tallahassee was tempered for many by the reality that this could be one of the toughest legislative sessions ever. Successful ballot initiatives, coupled with an already strained state budget, have many in agriculture concerned, and rightfully so.

Speaking with various industry leaders and representatives about a number of these issues reminded me of a group discussion at a friend's hunt camp this winter. I had been invited for dinner and to watch a football game afterward by generator power. This particular group has been hunting the woods of this cattle ranch for many years through a lease with the landowner.

To a vast majority of agricultural landowners, wildlife and environment are valuable components of operations. Many invest heavily to protect wildlife on their lands, even to the extent of hiring wildlife biologists and guarding against poachers who constantly want to invade their property.

Things are changing, though, thanks to pressures of environmental groups and the state's willingness to spend tax dollars for what some feel is a misguided environmental 'movement' that is having a hard time separating fiction from fact. In this case, the landowner was pressured a few years ago into selling lakefront lowlands to

the state. The situation was part of the ongoing Ordinary High Water Mark, or so-called 'Sovereign Lands' debate. The state took ownership of many beautiful wetlands, oak hammocks, cypress heads and swamp grass areas previously protected by the same family for three, maybe four generations. Now, presumably, it belongs to the public to be 'protected for future generations,' or at least that's what proponents of the purchase want us to believe.

Apparently, many so-called environmentalists seldom actually go into the woods to witness firsthand the ultimate result of their actions. In this instance the lease hunters lost access to land they previously hunted, but the bigger losers were

wildlife, the environment and the taxpayers of Florida.

Post-purchase, the state moved in, mowing down untold acres of beautiful oaks, cypress and other historically pristine land so its fence line could be cleared and constructed. Remember, these properties and wildlife had been protected at private expense, under private ownership, for generations. For the most part the only 'public' now with access are airboaters, hardly the 'masses' promoted by purchase proponents in the first place.

And the poor wildlife ... Imagine the free and legal access poachers now have, to not only get into these areas but to get clear shooting along state fence line in areas previously very difficult to hunt by anybody.

Isolation of these areas allows for the unscrupulous to have almost open access at any time of day or night. While watching football late the night of my visit to the hunt camp, we could hear airboat engines in the distance interrupted by the "POW, POW" of gunshots before the engines raced again and faded off into the night.

Representatives of groups promoting such misguided use of state funds should spend more time in the woods. They may realize the practices of private landowners and the wishes of true environmentalists are surprisingly similar. A better meeting of the minds could save lots of money, give the environment its best chance at survival, and ease state financial pressures immensely. **V**

Gary Cooper is the founder and president of AgNet Media, Inc. in Gainesville, Florida.



READER LETTERS

Dear Gary:

I read your February 2019 article and immediately noticed your reference to Patrick Smith's novel "A Land Remembered."

This is probably one of the most interesting yet revealing novels I have ever read. You are so correct about how this book tells the story of how Florida had changed in a lifetime. Being from Virginia and having been married at the time into an old Florida family, it helped make me very aware of what I should

stand in for politics and in my professional life as a Realtor.

In my legislative days and as Speaker pro tempore, I advised new legislators to read Mr. Smith's novel as a way to understand where our state was and where we are now. I do the same for those in my profession of real estate.

Keep up the work on educating the public on what is the real root cause of our most recent battle against "the tides" this past year. Farmers, grove owners, professionals and agriculture

organizations need to ramp up their education of the elected officials and the public. If we don't, then the aforementioned will be battling restrictive legislation and struggling for survival in the very near future. The votes are in the cities and not in the groves and pastures. Profits need to be invested back into education of the "real root cause" of the pollution and it needs to be done now.

Best regards,
Lindsay M. Harrington
Punta Gorda