

## Biologist: Controversial land linked to I-75 debate key to preserving watershed

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Biologist Jim Beever told Lee County's DRGR Committee on Wednesday they have a chance to make a real difference in the Estero Bay watershed.

Beever said making that difference depends heavily on what happens on the Agripartners property, a hotly-debated tract east of I-75 made infamous nationally of late by the Coconut Road earmark controversy.

Beever, a senior planner for the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council and former biologist for the state, is finishing up a year-long study of the watershed. The watershed stretches south into Collier County and all the way north to the Caloosahatchee River, but it includes all of the 83,000-acre southeast Lee Density Reduction Groundwater Resource Area the commission-appointed committee is examining.

He made repeated references to the two sections owned by part-time Naples resident Daniel Aronoff.

"The keystone to the DRGR is protecting the Agripartners property," Beever said. "It's absolutely crucial to protecting the watershed."

Old flow-ways within the watershed should be re-connected, Beever said.

"Not cut off by 4-mile long canals along the interstate," he said.

Agripartners had permits for four miles of deep drainage ditches, but environmental groups and Lee County have held up the plans.

"We don't need new regional canals in the DRGR," he said. "In fact we should be plugging the ones we have."

Beever said he looked at over 350 Environmental Resource Permit applications filed in the watershed in 2006 and 2007. The applications covered 16,015 acres. Two were denied. Three were withdrawn. More than 300 were approved.

Beever said the watershed lost 6.4 percent of its wetlands.

"There's an opportunity here to make a difference in the DRGR," Beever said. "It's the

liquid heart of the Estero Bay watershed. If the DRGR is treated like the rest of the watershed has been opportunity is irretrievably lost."

The DRGR committee will make recommendations to commissioners on land use regulation changes in the southeast Lee expanse, including possible mining regulations. Attention has focused on thousands of acres that could be mined, especially with a federal judge closing down part of the Dade County Lake Belt mines.

Committee member Scott McCaleb, a Florida Rock employee, is also a member of the state's Strategic Aggregates Review Task Force, which will make recommendations for mining regulations to the Legislature this year. He said recommendations the task force might make include more state review of mining and less local government control.

There would be a recognition that the rock needed to build Florida's roads and buildings is a critical state resource, and that mining is an essential industry. Existing mines would be encouraged to remain active and mining would be expanded in areas where it already exists.

Local consulting ecologist Kevin Erwin talked to the committee about possible restoration in the DRGR. He said it's far easier to restore farmland to its natural state than a mine.

"You put a mine in and you can't go back and put in native habitat after that," he said.

Erwin said the DRGR is a "frontier" on which there's little hard ecological or hydrological data.

"It's not a pristine area," he said. "There's a lot of ag. There's a lot of homes."

The good news is an aggressive land purchase program has placed much of the eastern portion of the DRGR in public hands already.

"Not just a little land," Erwin said. "A lot of land."

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