

# Why Not Wall in Phosphate Mines?

BY Michael Heller

Water LIFE Editor

Last month the environmental lawyers from *EarthJustice* filed a lawsuit to contest permitting for a new phosphate mine at Horse Creek on the Peace River. In related happenings a couple of interesting things came together for me last month as well.

First, a guy who distributes travel brochures around the state said there were tons of foreign visitors in Florida this summer. The pattern, he said, is they arrive in Miami to see South Beach then they drive to Orlando for the 'theme park experience' and then they drive to .... are you ready? Everglades City, to take an airboat ride into the swamp and see the Florida wildlife. "Airboat operators down there are having their best year ever," he had said.

Another interesting thing happened when I did a spot on local talk-radio promoting our *Don Ball School of Fishing* kids program that starts next month. In the last minute of the show a listener called in to ask me what I thought about phosphate mining and septic tanks and the effect they have on the watershed. I told him, in my opinion, they were very bad things and that phosphate mining could be a real disaster if all that acid laden phosphate sludge got washed into the Peace River again. I said there's not anything we could do if something happened at the phosphate mines. That hung with me: *Not anything we could do.*

Then another interesting thing happened. I got a call from Shannon Gadbois from Thomas Ryan Associates. They own a build-

ing on Marion that had some serious flood protection installed when TS Fay was approaching. Shannon called me in response to a question about the lengths his company went to, to protect their building. He told me the devices were 'flood gates' and that all the new buildings in downtown Punta Gorda must now have some sort of FEMA approved flood protection. Flood gates, he said, were preferable to a raised foundation since (in nice weather) passers-by were less likely to walk in to a store if they had to climb steps.

So later, I looked up 'flood gates' on the Internet. What I found was a revelation. Flood gates and flood walls are being used in many areas nationwide. The cities of Davenport and Grand Forks and the Red River Valley, areas that were all hit so hard by flooding, are now showcases for new 'flood wall' technology. I saw one city had even completely surrounded its garbage dump. It seemed like after they had a problem they all figured out the answer.

A light went on in my head. Phosphate mining is our garbage dump, our problem area and the environment is what tourists want to see. So why wait until there is a disaster? Why not surround the phosphate mines with a flood wall now? We have to figure there is going to be high water at some point. After TS Fay, the Peace River climbed to flood stage. With a little more water we could have had a phosphate disaster right then. Or worse yet, they could have decided to release water from a storm flooded mine back into the Peace River. We can't let either



Above: DeSoto County workers take water samples from the Peace River twice a month, but if they found something 'phosphate' bad what could we do?

Below: One of the new flood gates in Punta Gorda. There is another flood gate photo on page 9.

of those things happen.

If we want to be known for our pristine estuary, its rivers and all the living things here, then the County should be promoting our Harbor and wildlife with billboards on I-75 and going to extremes to protect it right now. That's what we elect these guys for.

Could Charlotte County team up with DeSoto County and mandate a reverse flood protection ordinance that would require phosphate mining operations to be surrounded by a barrier-wall capable of holding back a 100 year flood? That 'metal-wall technology' exists today. Money will solve this problem and phosphate mining is very profitable. So if they whine that it's too expensive (which they will) then the county tells them they just can't dig. Protecting the environment must be included in the cost of doing business and I think the Feds will support us. Mandating a pristine estuary should be a no-brainer, especially in an election year.



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