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DEP's errors at Piney Point

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Piney Point Phosphate continues to be a serious threat to human health and the environment. The recent leak of contaminated water at the former phosphate plant clearly demonstrates that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Port Manatee are not doing enough to safeguard the public or the environment.

Piney Point is a hazard to the surface water and groundwater of Tampa Bay, Terra Ceia Bay and Bishop Harbor. Bishop Harbor is located immediately downstream of Piney Point and is an Outstanding Florida Water . An OFW designation is intended to provide additional protection to special waters recognized for their ecological significance, by providing the highest degree of protection under state permitting policies.

HRK Holdings LLC, owners of the site, and Port Manatee successfully persuaded the DEP to allow the radioactive phosphogypsum stacks to be used for dredge material disposal. Apparently, one environmentally damaging project is leading to another.

A tear in the stack liners under the dredged material has allowed the discharge of millions of gallons of contaminated water into Bishop Harbor. Disposing of the dredged materials from Port Manatee berth 12 has created a significant threat to the surrounding environmental resources by its potential to degrade the water quality of Bishop Harbor.

As reported by the DEP, the millions of gallons of water leaking daily from the former phosphate plant contain elevated levels of cadmium and high levels of nitrogen and phosphorus.

Cadmium is toxic to the marine environment and can have lethal and sublethal effects on the growth and reproduction of invertebrates such as the blue crab and shrimp. Cadmium does not break down in the environment, so any cadmium leaked from Piney Point will be an environmental hazard for Bishop Harbor for many years to come.

Yet the current situation could have been completely avoided.

The sale of the Piney Point plant to HRK Holdings was the height of irresponsibility by the DEP, whose mission it is to safeguard the public's health and the environment. As a result, the taxpayers of Florida face a future of risk from unknown land-use activities that could turn the former phosphate plant into a hazardous waste nightmare again.

DEP agreed to the sale of the property without knowing what future activities would be proposed at Piney Point, or whether future land uses would involve the radioactive phosphogypsum waste stacks.

The sale of Piney Point was a misguided attempt by DEP to delegate its public responsibilities to a limited liability corporation. It has set a precedent for the management of any future bankrupted or abandoned phosphogypsum stacks in Florida. Future commerce at Piney Point will likely unnecessarily expose the environment and the general public to otherwise avoidable chemical contaminants and radiation exposure.

DEP has yet to complete a comprehensive, statewide assessment plan on Florida's two dozen or more phosphogypsum stacks. These stacks remain as a toxic legacy of the phosphate industry.

Each phosphogypsum stack carries with it the risk of creating another Piney Point environmental and financial fiasco.

Port Manatee and HRK Holdings should use every available means to protect the environment and reduce the impact their operations are having.

It is now up to the DEP and Port Manatee to correct the mistake made by dumping the dredge material from berth 12 into a phosphogypsum stack. ManaSota-88 expects these agencies to do nothing less.

The contaminated water leaking at Piney Point certainly raises the question: Can a limited liability corporation such as HRK Holdings adequately manage and operate Piney Point in an environmental sound manner?

Right now, the answer appears to be no.

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