

THE EXTERNALIZERS

Recent “sinkholes” have generated concerns about the costly repairs and dangerous conditions that are popping down all over the place, with suspicions narrowing to the excessive use of water by strawberry farmers. They claim their business would go down the drain if water restrictions were imposed on their endless tap to the aquifer which has diminished by more than fifty feet owing to the profuse amount of water needed to coat the berries for protection against a damaging hard freeze.

Farmers oppose any suggestion that solely places the blame on them, but do understand the need to protect central Florida’s water supply. They feel it’s just a few very cold nights a year that such concerns are forced to take second seat to securing their crop. And, it may be presumptuous and ineffective to place blame on spikes in water withdrawal for fear of compromising a cure by focusing on the symptoms, not the disease.

For it’s not just the farming industry that depends on an occasional helping hand to get through some unavoidable anomaly threatening their bottom line. It’s the bottom line in the deals corporations construct with regulatory commissions and oversight agencies that allow them to pass along much of their operational cost to the public. This is done by design. It’s called “externalizing.”

Externalizing is double dipping. To operate in violation of environmental regulations because fines for doing so equate to a fraction of the cost saved when not staying within those guidelines. This is externalizing a portion of the operational cost to the public.

In most cases the amount of operational costs an industry can pass on to the taxpayers is enormous and undisclosed. It’s the intentional assembly of protocols that redirect the liabilities to the public instead of to those responsible, that is, “externalization.” Corporations’ externalizing cost has been a modus operandi for decades and not only does it provide exemption from liabilities and obligations, it facilitates large profits.

In defense of strawberry farmers, almost all crops grown in this region are farmed in the same manner, lots of water. But there is another industry with a larger impact than that of farming on central Florida’s struggling environment; one that uses as much water, is destructive and externalizes huge expense: Phosphate Mining.

Phosphate mining is seen by many as Florida’s cancer. It would only take one fly-over central Florida to see what they mean. It has left ruination that stretches across more than five counties, leaving in its wake a hundred thousand acres of barren scorched earth. It uses an equal amount of water as strawberries. The water, after use, is held in gigantic gypsum stacks 40 feet deep. The tens of billions of gallons are held back by a 20 ft. levee filled to the brim. The water stored in these fifty acre ponds is so toxic it would kill all fish and vegetation in its path, as evidenced by past levee breaches. And each time it happened, the fines were a fraction of the public’s cost.

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The phosphate mining industry has enjoyed externalizing the cost of the hazards that have plagued their industry for many years. But it's the externalizing of their operational costs that has kept their hand deep in the public's pocket.

Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) have been the facilitators, permitting Mosaic Mining **99 million gallons a day (MGD)** of central Florida aquifer water. This surpasses what the City of Tampa is permitted to pump from the same well field. Last year, through the months of drought, local officials chose to hand out \$100 fines for using sprinklers, indulged in expensive "save water" campaigns, and forced the rate hikes further taxing the public rather than curbing Mosaic's profuse use of water. The citizens in the surrounding counties were persuaded to spend \$600 million on a water desalinization plant, that to date, has yet to produce its designed 25 MGD. The sole purpose of investing in this water plant was to relieve the over-pumped Florida aquifer. And the community still have to buy their water from this public/private endeavor, and Mosaic pumps 99 MGD for FREE.

Mosaic's multi-million dollar ad campaign includes broadcast and print media that promotes them as down-to-earth good old boys, with claims of recycling 95% of their water and restoring their land to a picture-perfect setting. The recycled water is only recycled to them, it can not be used for any other reason as it is extremely acidic and only reused through large underground pipes to baseball slurries from holding stack to holding stack to concentrate the gypsum, allowing the 50 acre ponds to evaporate many millions of gallons a day. This water will never percolate back to the aquifer from which it came; stuck in these stacks the contaminated water becomes a very hazardous accident waiting to happen in the nest of some of Florida's most valuable farmland.

The strawberry farmers shouldn't bear all the blame, most should be directed to the phosphate miners and their conspiring counterparts: county commissioners and SWFWMD.

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