

Medicaid Fraud p.92 Portrait: Osceola County/Kissimmee p.20

Florida Trend

THE MAGAZINE OF FLORIDA BUSINESS

November 2012

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Environmental Issues

Ranching Water

The problem for Lake Okeechobee is that the human-made drainage systems in its watershed force too much water to flow to the lake too fast. Restoring the Kissimmee River's natural meandering path has helped, but a solution still requires finding a way to hold more water upstream, where phosphorous can settle out, and then let the water flow, as it did historically, slowly toward the lake.

Environmental groups and the South Florida Water Management District have found an alternative to hugely expensive, government-built reservoirs: Cattle ranches. Ranchers are being paid to "farm water" in what is called "dispersed" or "distributed" water storage and release. It's a

less risky, faster and cheaper alternative to public works projects. It keeps properties on the tax roll, is cooperative, enhances wetland areas, restores groundwater levels and allows phosphorous to settle out rather than flow downstream to harm the lake and Everglades.

Cattleman Jimmy Wohl, who oversees his family's 5,200-acre Rafter T Ranch in Sebring, is in the final year of a three-year contract under which he stores water on as much as 1,450 acres of the ranch during the wet season. The program pays him \$60,000 a year. "We are really adjusting our production cycle to conform with Mother Nature and the program," Wohl says. "It's actually made us better manag-

"People see it as a win-win. The landowner gets the money, and we get the benefit without having to build these giant reservoirs."

— Audubon of Florida Executive Director Eric Draper

ers." Calves are born from October to December, as the rainy season trails off and waters on the ranch recede. By the time the rainy season starts putting acreage under water, the calves have been moved to the Midwest to feed lots.

Last year, more than 100 landowners participated in water retention work, according to a legislative report. Audubon of Florida Executive Director Eric Draper says it costs \$10,000 per acre-foot to build a government reservoir; the rent for an acre-foot of water storage on private land averages \$80 to \$100. "We're very happy with the way it's going," Draper says.