



Seagrass Bill Will Help Marine Life

By THOMAS RIES

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Florida is currently at a major environmental crossroads in regards to seagrass restoration and protection. Seagrass is a critical component of our ecology and vital to maintaining our state's natural beauty.

Scientists are well aware of the benefits of seagrass to the ecosystem, including its ability to improve water quality by stabilizing sediment as well as sustaining hundreds of species of fish that depend on seagrass beds.

Experts believe up to 70 percent of Florida's marine recreational fish depend upon these seagrass communities as refuge or habitat for their survival.

Florida has lost more than 60 percent of its seagrass habitats since the 1950s with the additional destruction of thousands of acres of seagrass due to propeller scars and boat grounding holes.

Today's state programs do not have the finances or manpower to restore these public and very valuable resources.

Using 1994 numbers, there are 174,000 acres of damaged seagrass beds and boat grounding blowholes and currently there is no financial means to restore these resources. Currently on Gov. Charlie Crist's desk is CS/HB 7059 that allows for the possibility of a creative public-private partnership to be established in order to support scientifically proven methods of seagrass restoration. This bill could provide up-front mitigation for seagrass beds for public-interest projects and thus repair and expand these critical aquatic resources.

This legislation provides for the only feasible solution that does not require state funding, i.e. taxpayer dollars, for this kind of environmental restoration to occur.

This legislation does not affect current regulatory permit standards - the Florida Department of Environmental Protection still maintains the requirements of providing public benefit and demonstrating avoidance and minimization of impacts prior to obtaining a building permit. This legislation does not call for an expansion of coastal development ... it simply allows for a guaranteed method to ensure that this critical natural resource gets restored.

Gov. Crist has been a champion for environmental causes and has touted Florida's beautiful coastlines and beaches time and again. I urge the governor to carefully review the positive impacts it will have on our fragile seagrass communities.

This legislation, which has already gained the support of DEP and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, protects, maintains and expands Florida's delicate natural beauty and I urge Gov. Crist to sign this important legislation.

Thomas Ries is president of Ecosphere Restoration Institute, a nonprofit organization, and co-chair of the conservation committee of Tampa Audubon Society.

