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MIAMI-DADE COUNTY FARM BUREAU

Dade farmers pawns in a political game

By Katie Edwards
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Can agriculture stay economically viable through land conservation programs and regulations?

Miami-Dade County planners and commissioners must address this question before embarking on land conservation programs and considering further regulations to agriculture.

Let's start with what it takes to be economically viable. This assumes that a farm or nursery can be profitable. If a grower can make money farming, it's probable that he will continue farming. A grower's bottom line is driven by good business decisions and crop prices that exceed a grower's production costs.

Increased urbanization, escalating land values, environmental protection and water quality preservation have created great debate over how to manage the future of agriculture in Miami-Dade County. The Agricultural Land Retention Study was developed by a team of consultants and ultimately rejected with prejudice by a majority of the Citizens Advisory Committee members. Ultimately, the commercial growers believed the study failed to address the economic forces needed to keep the industry healthy.

Land conservation and purchase and transfer of development rights programs are being drafted. This comes on the heels of \$30 million for conservation programs that was approved by voters in the county's General Obligation Bond in November 2004. In May, the county hired its first agricultural manager to address ways to keep agriculture -- its third-largest industry -- strong.

The Urban Development Boundary has many citizens discussing the economic and environmental sustainability of the county. For the last year, growers have been the overlooked pawns in a political game of wills: the will to preserve the environment and water quality, and the will to provide for growth and affordable housing.

There must be a balance between growth, environmental protection and protection of property rights. Achieving this balance will not be easy, especially for the growers who are caught in the middle of a land-use tug-of-war.

Miami-Dade's agricultural industry continues to look for ways to create new markets, find new customers and keep operating costs low.

The move to a global economy has opened up new markets. More than ever, growers must compete in an international marketplace. Trade is an essential part of our economy, but it has also led to the demise of industries that are forced to compete on an uneven playing field. Dade's growers compete with products from countries with lax environmental regulations and weak labor regulations.

Foreign competition poses the biggest threat to the profitability of agriculture. It would seem appropriate to focus resources on the core of the problem. The county is focusing primarily on ways to regulate agricultural land and maintain a "no net loss of farmland" policy.

Without an economically viable industry, such programs will prove futile if the economic returns to agriculture are insufficient to keep large acreages of farmland in production.

Growers, elected officials and concerned citizens must unite to safeguard Miami-Dade's agricultural industry. We must demand parity in agricultural production methods. We must command the attention of our elected officials and world leaders. We must collaborate and focus on the central issues rather than adopting a "not in my backyard" approach.

This must be done if we are going to keep agriculture in Miami-Dade County.

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