



Friends *of the* Everglades

Sent via electronic mail to Nikki.Fried@FDACS.gov

August 25, 2020

Commissioner Nikki Fried
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
Plaza Level 10, The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Dear Commissioner Fried,

On August 4, 2020, [your department announced](#) a second phase of enhancements to the pre-harvest sugar field burning regulations with a stated commitment to “reduce smoke and ash impacts for Everglades communities.” We are thankful to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services for its formal recognition of the serious public health threat posed to surrounding communities, and we implore you to further protect the lives of Glades residents by expanding real protections and moving towards an eventual ban of pre-harvest sugarcane burning.

By now you are well aware of the significant health threats that face communities where smoke and ash hang heavy in the skies more months of the year than not. As evidenced by [local testimony](#) describing widespread and enduring health issues, the current protections fall short of safeguarding residents living in and around the Everglades Agricultural Area. Burn wind restrictions afforded to more-affluent, neighboring counties are not equally applied to communities in the Glades. An 80-acre buffer zone shields surrounding wildlands from pre-harvest burns, but leaves local homes and schools exposed and neglected.

The lack of protection imposes air pollution, chronic respiratory concerns and other health risks in vulnerable communities. Additionally, these health risks have a negative effect on the economies of impacted communities. In the age of COVID-19, this threat underscores a dire need to mandate sweeping and specific changes to the current burning regulations that fail to protect and disproportionately impact minority populations.

We recognize you are an outspoken advocate for common-sense safety measures to combat COVID-19 and ask you to consider the incongruous nature of your declared priority to “...[\[keep\] Florida’s residents, communities, and environment safe](#)” when at the same time you are allowing the added harm of pre-harvest burning to continue during the pandemic. There are alternatives, as you know. It gives us hope that your office continues to encourage adoption of green harvesting — a cost-effective, healthier practice vetted by major sugarcane producers in [Brazil and Australia](#). However, encouraging these practices is not enough for the Glades communities. Residents need real protection now.

Redrawn zone boundaries announced as an overdue solution to growing populations in affected areas do not clearly ensure equal protections from county to county. To this end, we formally join the growing chorus of voices calling for an established 27-30 mile burn-ban buffer to guarantee that residents in communities south of Lake Okeechobee are afforded the same defense against the dark plumes of [toxic](#) smoke as their wealthier neighbors, until such a time that pre-harvest burning is banned entirely.

While the latest enhancements to the pre-harvest sugar field burning regulations represent a long-overdue improvement, we respectfully remind FDACS that there is still a long way to go if we are to truly untwine racial inequality from the environmental and health crises presented by sugarcane burning. We are grateful to FDACS for considering action to implement real and lasting protection for Glades residents. We ask that you move swiftly. Florida's most vulnerable communities are at risk, and they're depending on you to act.

Respectfully,

Eve Samples
Executive Director, Friends of the Everglades

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