

It's no secret that northwest Florida is exploding with new development. But at a time when the state ought to be making smart decisions, the Legislature took us backward and delayed some really important protections for wetlands smack in the path of the development boom.

Citizens should urge Gov. Jeb Bush to veto this bad legislation, HB 759.

Haven't we learned from South Florida's mistakes? Developers drained and filled the southern part of the state willy-nilly for years. Today, citizens in the region are paying the price. A place that was once blessed with lots of clean water now has drinking-water shortages, flooding and polluted rivers, lakes and bays.

Compare that with north Florida, which has some of the cleanest water left in the state. Too bad some Florida lawmakers care more about making developers happy than they do about protecting the Panhandle's wetlands.

Everyone in Florida ought to care, because Panhandle wetlands clean the water, buffer the coast from storms and fuel the seafood industry in the Gulf of Mexico.

In 16 northwest Florida counties, protections for wetlands and stormwater management are weak. In the rest of the state, a developer who wants to impact a wetland has to get reviewed under the environmental resource permitting program, nicknamed ERP. This program was supposed to go into effect in northwest Florida in 1999, but the Legislature keeps postponing it.

Because there is no environmental resource permitting in northwest Florida, developers cashing in on the current boom don't have to get a permit to fill in so-called isolated wetlands, which cover hundreds of thousands of acres. Developers also have weaker rules on the stormwater that comes off their developments, which means taxpayers will have to pick up the tab to deal with more polluted water coming off more paved surfaces. Think about that the next time a hurricane hits.

Gov. Jeb Bush wisely supports environmental resource permitting and included \$1.9 million in his budget this year to fund it. But a Republican House member from Fort Myers, Trudi Williams, sponsored HB 759, which will delay northwest Florida's resource permitting program until 2010! That's time enough for developers to fill in an awful lot of wetlands.

Interestingly, Williams used to sit on the board of the South Florida Water Management District, a board that's spending billions to replumb the diked and drained Florida Everglades. Northwest Florida residents want to prevent environmental disaster - not spend billions to fix it later.

All except one of the co-sponsors of Williams' bill hail from South and Central Florida.

Doesn't it seem odd that people with ruined water supplies at one end of the state are trying to keep weak protections in the northwest, one place where there's plenty of good water left? Does that make any sense? The Legislature should never have gone along with this naked attempt to appease developers at the public's expense.

Call Gov. Bush at (850) 488-2272 and tell him to veto HB 759. Let's protect our waters - we're going to need them.

*Linda Young is Southeast regional director for The Clean Water Network, a coalition of 155 grass-roots groups throughout Florida.*

**This story can be found at: <http://tampatrib.com/opinion/MGBADDLMN8E.html>**