

ericWRIGHT

A respected author and speaker, Eric Wright is the editor of *i4 Business* and *SpaceCoast Business* magazines.

With Dean Mead Past President and Current Shareholder

Michael D. Minton

Most of Florida's agribusiness leaders and those that help shape the state's agriculture policy grew up in and around the industry. Michael Minton, the past president of Dean Mead, who serves as the firm's chair of the Agribusiness Industry Team, is no exception. He represents family businesses with an emphasis on generationally-owned agribusinesses, assisting with their organizational structure, tax, business, estate and succession planning. His 30-plus years of experience in Florida agribusiness makes him one of the most authoritative voices on tax, land and water resources and innovative approaches to these complex issues.



“Instead of trying to drain water off land, the new frontier is the realization that water has value and how it can be maintained on the land, and cleaned and provided where it is needed.”

EW: Tell me about your agricultural roots.

MM: The Mintons first came to Florida in the 1830s and we originally settled in the area of Hastings. I've been told that we brought the first potato eyes here and were potato farmers, then moved into citrus production. Then, when the freezes in the early 20th century destroyed the citrus, my grandfather moved south, settling in Vero Beach, while part of the family settled in Brevard County. Grace/Naco was a primary fertilizer supplier in the state and it is our understanding that my grandfather along with two others, J.J. Parrish (Parrish Medical Center) and Ben Hill Griffin Jr. (UF's Ben Hill Griffin Stadium), divided the state into three territories as their representatives.

That legacy gets into your DNA and I have always enjoyed working with agriculture clients. I rarely have to second guess what one of the families I am representing is going to do; they are very true to their word and appreciative of our advice. I'm the youngest of four boys and my father encouraged each of his sons to go into a different arena of the industry, one was in production, another real estate development, one's a CPA and involved in marketing and for me, it was law. I found my niche in the tax arena under great mentors, Prof. Jim Wershow and Jack Freeland.

EW: How did you get involved specifically in water management issues?

MM: In the late 90s, I served for four years on the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District. That really introduced me to the intricacies of water law issues and how it related to everything else I had been involved in. It opened my eyes to the opportunity to focus part of my practice on representing agribusiness families and how to help them succeed from



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one generation to the next and to identify the greatest opportunities with their property.

Instead of trying to drain water off land, the new frontier is the realization that water has value and how it can be maintained on the land, and cleaned and provided where it is needed. That is one of the new future opportunities for agriculture: to store, clean and deliver water where it is needed.

EW: Before we get into the water issue, what is the biggest misconception our coastal and urban population has about Florida's agricultural industry?

MM: Most don't realize that much of the produce they purchase in the grocery store is actually grown within the state. Also, because of the citrus greening and freezes, you are seeing more and more growers diversify into other crops, particularly high value items like strawberries and blueberries. What Adam Putnam has done to provide healthy school lunch programs, by supplying locally grown, fresh produce, has been tremendous, both for the students and the producers.

EW: Historically we have had an abundance or even a surplus of water. What has changed?

MM: In the past, we saw groundwater being used to meet the demands for potable water by the general population and agriculture using a mix of ground and surface water. Typically, agriculture uses the least expensive water available. We are now coming to the dynamic of having to compete for groundwater, coupled with the fact that we don't efficiently manage our surface water to meet demands. We're fighting over groundwater, while letting surface water go to the tides, which of course produces harm.

When the central and south Florida flood control project was designed, they built a lattice work of canals that drained the area, so it could be tilled for agriculture and to protect the populations against flooding. The idea was to take water from the center of the state and rapidly carry it to the coast. They also designed large reservoirs to hold the water before it was sent to the coast, however, those reservoirs never got built.

To the pioneers, nature was the adversary that you had to collectively harness to make useful. My father (O.R. Minton, Sr.) who was one of those pioneers, recognized that over-draining was as harmful as too much water and instilled in us an appreciation for conservation as an early leader in soil and water conservation efforts. He often shared with me, 'In your lifetime, people will figure out that water is valuable and work to retain it. Whoever controls the water wins!'

We get between four to five feet of rainwater across the state per year. The problem is most of it comes in a three-month period and we send it to the tide, which does all kinds of harm.

EW: What is the answer or answers?

MM: I have spent much of my career advocating for addressing that missing element in the original flood control project. I think we need to utilize a reservoir system where we can hold, clean and manage the water. Rather than send it to the coast, return it to the St. Johns River system, where areas that don't have enough water could be supplied. The turnpike created a dam effect that diverts the natural flow of water directly into the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon because of the canal system.

In southwest Florida there is a project called the Peace River/Manasota Project. The Southwest Florida Water Management District designed a reservoir that captures the peak flows off the Peace River and they use that water to rehydrate the wetlands and have added aquifer storage and recovery. These are underground wells that pump fresh water down into wells, where it can then be used when needed. This is more efficient than surface water storage because you lose so much to evaporation.

This project has been hugely successful and it meets the needs of these surrounding counties. We have proposed this in other areas, as it keeps water from being discharged into coastal lagoons and provides potable water where it is needed.

EW: What about stormwater drain-off immediately into these water bodies?

MM: One of the things the Florida Department of Transportation has been charged with doing is figuring out how to capture and use the water that comes off the roads. Up to now, the goal is to discharge it, not capture it and clean it. On the island of Bermuda there is very little fresh water; they collect their water in cisterns off their roofs. When we view water as an asset we need to preserve and protect versus a problem we need to drain and discharge, everything will change.

This excess water is in fact the cheapest water we have available. Groveland Utilities, a project Evans Properties Inc. is working on with St. Johns River and South Florida Water Management Districts, has the potential to deliver around 100 to 125 million gallons of water a day into the St. Johns River system, for about \$1.20 to \$1.25 per thousand gallons. As compared to the cost of desalinization, where it is my understanding that an estimated 10 million-gallon a day plant would cost in excess of a billion dollars and the cost per 1,000 gallons of fresh water is about \$3.10 to 3.50. Is it more expensive than just drilling a well? Yes. Is it far less expensive than desalinization? Absolutely.

This makes sense; our agriculture clients are both strategically located and are willing partners in this common cause. ♦

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