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## Filmmaker: Sugar family may have blocked documentary about them

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From their perch atop Florida's sugar industry, the Fanjul family wields political and cultural power from the sunny sands of Palm Beach to the corridors of Washington.

Now filmmaker Amy Serrano believes the family has used that power to block the showing of her documentary critical of their umbrella company, Flo-Sun Inc., at the Miami International Film Festival. And she says her project about the Fanjuls is not the only one to run into trouble in recent months. She points to a film Jodie Foster wanted to make about them that was scrapped and the fight the CBS TV series "Cane" faced before it was aired.

"I feel like my film has been blackballed," said Serrano of her documentary, "The Sugar Babies." It's about the plight of Haitian sugar workers in the Dominican Republic, where the Fanjul family and other companies harvest cane.

Gaston Cantens, a spokesman for the Fanjuls' West Palm Beach-based Florida Crystals Corp., called any accusation that the Fanjuls exerted undue pressure ridiculous.

Serrano's film was rejected from the festival, which runs through Sunday, days before the final lineup was announced. The rejection came despite initial support from the festival's organizers and acclaim at more than a dozen other festivals worldwide.

Serrano said she has no proof the Fanjuls were behind the decision but maintains explanations for her film's rejection and the subsequent response from another Miami festival were suspicious.

"Miami stands at the epicenter of the Dominican Republic, Haiti and Florida sugar happenings," said Serrano. She called the decision "a missed opportunity to transform injustice into consumer consciousness."

Films about other sugar families are running into direct opposition from their subjects.

The Dominican Republic's Vicini sugar family recently hired a Washington, D.C., law firm to sue the makers of another documentary, "The Price of Sugar," for defamation.

Cantens said the sugar industry is tired of one-sided portrayals of "big sugar."

"For years we kind of took it on the chin," he said of stories alleging worker mistreatment and environmental pollution. "We're tired of taking it on the chin, and we're fighting back."

The Fanjuls' political influence is no small thing. It was the Cuban-American patriarch Alfie Fanjul's telephone call that interrupted President Clinton during an indiscreet moment with Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office. The family and its network have already given more than \$300,000 so far in the 2008 election cycle to political committees and candidates from both major parties.

Serrano, a Cuban-American and Miami native, said festival officials initially gushed over her film last

November. Back then, she told organizers she had already exhibited it elsewhere, including for students at Florida International University in Miami. It was a private showing but made local headlines when media showed up with the Dominican consul, who denounced the portrayal of his country.

Film festival officials originally said the FIU showing was fine, according to e-mail exchanges with Serrano. But, on Jan. 25, Serrano got another letter telling her the showing was a problem because of the media coverage, which disqualified it.

Festival director Patrick de Bokay denied the Fanjuls pressured him, saying "you have to make hard decisions, and you cannot take all the films."

Bokay said he offered to hold a special screening for "The Sugar Babies" at a later date and even hold forums to discuss the plight of sugar workers in the Dominican Republic.

That would mean much less publicity - and less controversy, Serrano said.

Days after the film festival's rejection, the Women's International Film Festival in Miami, which opens March 26, also began to backpedal on its invitation to show the film, Serrano said. Eventually the organizers offered a small theater with a forum to bring in different views on the issue.

Serrano, who has lined up a number of other festivals, plans to decline.

Foster dropped plans last year to produce and star in "Sugarland," based on a 2001 Vanity Fair expose. Robert De Niro was also reported to have signed on to the project, which would have been the actors' first reunion since "Taxi Driver." Foster was in talks with Universal at the time the project was dropped. She and De Niro declined to comment. Universal spokeswoman Stacey Ivers said the company considers many proposals that take years or are never made. She declined to comment specifically on "Sugarland."

Cantens said the Vanity Fair story, which focused on a series of lawsuits by Jamaican sugar workers, is out of date because the Fanjuls successfully appealed the cases.

"You read the Vanity Fair story, and you think, 'We can't believe these people are doing what they're doing.' But we won all the cases. There's no story," he said.

Greg Schell, an attorney who represents 1,500 of the workers, said two of the cases are going forward. A trial date for one of them is set for June in Palm Beach County small claims court.

The Fanjuls dropped their lawsuit against "Cane," a Cuban-flavored mix of "Dynasty" and "Dallas" set among South Florida's sugar fields, only after producers changed details, including morphing the family business from simply harvesting sugar to producing rum.

Cantens was unapologetic.

"We had a pretty good idea of where the series was headed. We were concerned about how close it would be aligned to the Fanjuls, and how it would depict Cubans," he said.