



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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SFWMD Board Approves Affordable Plan for *River of Grass* Acquisition *Amended Everglades land purchase agreement addresses changing economic conditions*

West Palm Beach, FL — The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) Governing Board today approved unanimously with one abstention a revised strategy to acquire land from the United States Sugar Corporation for Everglades restoration. The amended agreement provides for the initial purchase of approximately 26,800 acres of strategically located land south of Lake Okeechobee, with options to purchase another 153,000 acres should economic conditions allow in the future.

“The new terms allow the District to move forward with this opportunity to restore the *River of Grass* in a way that both better fits Florida’s current economic climate and also addresses important federal mandates related to the Everglades,” said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann. “By utilizing available cash on-hand and a fiscally prudent pay-as-you-go approach, the District will avoid new debt while ensuring the continued delivery of mission-critical services. The agency now also has immediate access to thousands of acres of property with high restoration potential while preserving the option to acquire additional land to benefit the Everglades in the future.”

Under the amended terms, the District would initially invest approximately \$197 million in cash to immediately acquire 26,800 acres, or 42 square miles, of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) and C-139 basin for water quality and environmental restoration projects. The District would have options to purchase the remaining 153,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar for up to 10 years.

Highlights of the amended acquisition include:

- Acquisition of 17,900 citrus acres in Hendry County to improve water quality in the C-139 basin, where phosphorus loads have been historically high. This parcel, just west of thousands of acres of existing constructed wetlands, can be used for water storage and treatment facilities that would improve the quality of water flowing into the Everglades.

- Purchase of 8,900 acres of sugarcane land in Palm Beach County to benefit the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge by expanding existing Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) and increasing water quality treatment for the S-5A basin, just east of Lake Okeechobee.
- An exclusive 3-year option to purchase either a specifically identified 46,800 acres or the entire 153,000 acres at a fixed price of \$7,400 per acre. U.S. Sugar could sell the option property to a third party but must retain the District's option.
- After the exclusive option period, a subsequent 2-year, non-exclusive option to purchase the approximately 46,800 acres at Fair Market Value. U.S. Sugar could sell all or a part of the option property, but subject to a Right of First Refusal by the District.
- A subsequent 7-year, non-exclusive option to purchase the remaining acres at Fair Market Value. U.S. Sugar could sell all or a part of the option property, but subject to a Right of First Refusal by the District.
- Under the revised contracts, closing on the 26,800 acres would take place in October 2010.

In identifying the 26,800 acres for this acquisition, the District evaluated science and engineering factors as well as its existing requirements and mandates, all of which drive the agency's restoration and water quality improvement efforts. This acquisition, together with the Talisman lands, would give the District access to more than 50,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee needed for project construction that will bring meaningful water quality and environmental improvements to the Everglades.

Today's action by the SFWMD Governing Board is the culmination of more than two years of work since Governor Charlie Crist first announced on June 24, 2008, that the District would begin negotiations with the U.S. Sugar Corporation to acquire land south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration.

The downsized, more affordable acquisition recognizes that economic conditions have changed dramatically since the original announcement and a subsequent revised agreement approved by the Governing Board in May 2009. The District's property tax revenues have declined by nearly \$150 million, or 30 percent, since 2008.

For additional information, see [Just the Facts: Reviving the River of Grass – Second Amended & Restated Agreement for Sale and Purchase](#).

Documents relating to the U.S. Sugar acquisition are posted online at www.sfwmd.gov/riverofgrass.

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About the Everglades:

America's Everglades once covered almost 11,000 square miles of south Florida. Just a century ago, water flowed down the Kissimmee River into Lake Okeechobee, then south through the Everglades to the Florida Bay – the ultimate destination of the pure sheetflow. Because of efforts to drain the marshland for agriculture, development and flood control, the Everglades is today half the size it was a century ago. Dubbed the River of Grass for the sawgrass that flourished throughout the marsh, the Everglades is a mosaic of freshwater ponds, prairies and forested uplands that supports a rich plant and wildlife community. Renowned for its wading birds and wildlife, the Everglades is home to dozens of federally threatened and endangered species, including the Florida panther, American crocodile, snail kite and wood stork. The mix of salt and freshwater makes it the only place on Earth where alligators and crocodiles exist side by side.

About the South Florida Water Management District

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.