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**South Florida Water Management District Acquires Land to Help Revive
the River of Grass**

26,800 acres provide opportunities for environmental and water quality improvements

West Palm Beach, FL — The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) today closed on the purchase of land from the United States Sugar Corporation, providing 26,800 acres of strategically located property south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration. The \$194 million acquisition places 42 square miles of agricultural land into public ownership for the construction of water quality improvement projects that will bring meaningful environmental benefits to the famed *River of Grass*.

“Hard work and a steadfast commitment to restore the *River of Grass* has successfully brought to fruition — in an affordable way — an opportunity to further improve water quality in the Everglades and address important federal mandates,” said SFWMD Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann. “Once considered out of reach, the District now has ready access to thousands of acres of strategically situated property to advance Florida’s steady progress in restoring the Everglades.”

Highlights of the 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 additional 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 southeast of Lake Okeechobee.

The agreement contains options to purchase another 153,000 acres for up to 10 years should future economic conditions allow. The options to acquire additional lands,

which provide further opportunities to benefit the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, include:

- 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.

"This acquisition allows access to critical land south of Lake Okeechobee needed for project construction that will bring meaningful water quality and environmental improvements to the Everglades," said Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mimi Drew. "We thank the Governing Board members for their thorough deliberation and their commitment to this once-in-a lifetime opportunity."

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 additional lands in the Everglades Agricultural Area already in public ownership, gives the District access to more than 40,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee needed for water quality and restoration project construction.

Today's closing is the culmination of more than two years of work since the District began negotiations with the U.S. Sugar Corporation in June 2008 to acquire land south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration. This downsized, more affordable acquisition recognizes dramatic changes in economic conditions over the last two years, which have resulted in a decline in District property tax revenues by nearly \$150 million, or 30 percent, since 2008.

For additional information, see [Just the Facts: Reviving the River of Grass – Land Purchased for Everglades Restoration](#).

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 urban development, agriculture 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.