



OPINION

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Costly Land Buy Would Impede Everglades Restoration Progress

For months, environmental groups and concerned residents have advocated for the South Florida Water Management District to exercise a 46,800-acre land purchase option with U.S. Sugar Corporation before an October deadline. After closely listening to their arguments and the technical expertise of District staff, and reviewing the option agreement, the SFWMD Governing Board voted unanimously not to exercise the option.

To hear some tell it, all of Everglades restoration – including protection of the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries – will fail or at least be seriously impaired without this particular land. The Board took the opposite view – that restoration will be impaired if the District *does* make the purchase.

Here's why:

- The purchase price for the land, required to be set at fair market value, is estimated at \$500–\$700 million. Using District resources even partially toward the purchase would eliminate critical funding needed for progress on restoration projects *already being designed and built* – on lands already purchased and in public ownership. This includes the much-needed reservoirs along the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers to help protect and restore those estuaries.
- The option agreement requires the purchase of all 46,800 acres scattered over numerous parcels, eliminating the ability to purchase only the land needed for the reservoir that advocates want.
- The contract negotiated in 2010 with U.S. Sugar also contains a 20-year “leaseback” provision on the option lands. Of the 46,800 acres in this option, the District could currently access only 1,100 acres – insufficient for the reservoir project.
- If constructed at a future date, a large reservoir at the suggested location would require extensive new canals, pump stations and other structures to move water to and from the project. Engineering and construction estimates are at least \$1 billion for additional infrastructure alone.
- This project would do very little to decrease discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers.

The District has prioritized its resources to complete water quality and water storage projects already underway in order to reap the benefits from these projects as soon as possible. In the coming years, this agency is fully committed to directing staff resources and public dollars on three critical efforts:

- Identified Restoration Strategies projects to improve Everglades water quality
- Priority projects in the state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), including the C-43 and C-44 reservoirs
- Moving water south through implementation of the Central Everglades Planning Project (CEPP)

Each of these large-scale initiatives has received broad public support and collectively are the wisest and most cost-effective path forward.

All of this work will require a significant financial commitment from the State of Florida and its federal partners. For the State's part, Governor Scott has proposed an ambitious \$5 billion funding plan over the next 20 years for Everglades restoration, most of which should be matched by the federal government, creating a \$9 billion source of funds.

The Governor's proposed funding includes money to plan for the best, most cost-efficient locations for additional restoration projects, including additional water storage needed both north and south of Lake Okeechobee.

If approved during the Legislature's special session, this dedicated, ongoing source of revenue would eliminate the "stops and starts" that slowed restoration work in the past and frustrated advocates. It is a significant investment for steady progress that we should all get behind – not a costly land buy with too many strings attached.

*Dan O'Keefe,
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