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U.S. Sugar land buy should be deferred

Support for the now-revised deal struck by Gov. Charlie Crist to purchase 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's farmland to restore water flow to the Everglades is hardly universal in the groups with a stake in the outcome. That ambivalence certainly is palpable at the South Florida Water Management District, whose seven-member board is supposed to vote today to accept or reject the deal.

Restoring Everglades

The reasons for such mixed feelings -- and that includes this Editorial Board -- is the agreement negotiated by Gov. Crist and U.S. Sugar. It is too sweet by half to the company. We have supported the purchase for the sake of Everglades restoration, but as more information has come to light about the deal our reservations have grown. Even though the company says that today is a do-or-die deadline for the District to decide on the purchase, the board ought to put off a final vote and renegotiate the terms.

- **First**, the \$1.3 billion purchase price is too high. The land has been independently appraised at \$930 million. It is the residents of South Florida who must pay for this deal, and they deserve a fairer price. What's more, there are legitimate concerns that the District will put off or drop other projects in order to pay for this land.
- **The agreement** allows U.S. Sugar to lease and farm the land for seven years at a rate of \$50 per acre. That is one-fourth of the going lease rate for comparable farmland -- too cheap. If the lease provision becomes part of the final agreement, the leasing price must be increased.
- **The District** would be buying far more land from U.S. Sugar than is needed for restoring sheet flow to the Glades. And in order to complete the sheet-flow project, the District would still have to obtain thousands of acres from Florida Crystals, which is not happy with the U. S. Sugar arrangement, particularly the seven-year lease. Today, there is no time frame for when the additional land will be obtained. Environmentally, it would be great to take so many acres out of sugar production, but it may not make sense for the District to become owner of all this land.
- **When he announced** the agreement in June, Gov. Crist promised a task force to devise

ways to help the farming communities dependent on U.S. Sugar. To date there is no task force. Clewiston and other towns in the area need solutions, and no deal should be accepted until it includes tangible help for these communities.

Protect public funds

The District's board has the responsibility of restoring the Everglades. But the board is equally responsible for protecting South Florida taxpayers in how it decides to spend their money. Before the District buys any U.S. Sugar land, it should renegotiate the agreement.

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