

## **Seal Deal for Everglades with U.S. Sugar Purchase**

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South Florida Water Management District officials will make a mistake if they do not complete a major land deal crucial to restoration of the Everglades.

Restoring Florida's famed River of Grass is important not just to the South Florida environment, but to its economy, as well. Because ensuring adequate drinking water for an increasingly thirsty peninsula is a prime goal of the project.

The deal is supposed to be closed Tuesday, when the district's board is expected to approve it.

But pockets of opposition have cropped up from local governments and area legislators fearing the loss of jobs and tax revenue from the eventual closing of the U.S. Sugar operations on the land.

Even delaying the approximately 180,000-acre purchase could cause it to be lost, as developers have also expressed interest in the land, which is considered crucial to restoring natural water flows to the upper Everglades.

The purchase is part of a much larger Everglades restoration, designed to reverse some — but not all — of the damage done to the Everglades by decades of development and drainage.

State officials had long sought the land, south of Lake Okeechobee, as a necessary piece of the puzzle to reassemble any significant part of the Everglades' original shallow, sheet water flow, which is critical to its natural function and health.

The purchase would also allow construction of wetlands that would act as natural filters to cleanse polluted stormwater flowing to the Everglades and would remove the cane fields that have been a major source of nutrients that have changed and degraded the ecology of the huge wetland.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who has been a strong supporter of the purchase and of the overall restoration, should exert his influence to urge the board to complete the purchase agreement Tuesday. To let this land slip away would be a major blow to Everglades restoration efforts.