

# Letters to the editor: Debating the latest U.S. Sugar deal

## Land could be last, best hope for saving entire ecosystem

The Everglades Trust and expert environmental scientists long have advocated land acquisition in the Everglades Agricultural Area as the best option to fulfill Florida's commitment to Everglades restoration. For decades, acquiring that land was an impossible dream. No one would stand up to Big Sugar interests that cared more about profit than preservation.

Fortunately, Gov. Crist had the courage to bring the biggest sugar player to the table and raise the stakes. With that stand, we are on the threshold of reclaiming large parts of the historic Everglades, making U.S. Sugar a partner rather than an opponent, and providing for a future of clean water, a renewed tourist industry and hope for new industries for the communities and people surrounding Lake Okeechobee.

The terms of the new acquisition allow the state to acquire 73,000 acres now with options on the remaining 107,000 acres. The \$536 million price is below the land's appraised value, and U.S. Sugar lease rates have been tripled. New terms also provide an opportunity to exchange land for property that will reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades and, hopefully, will encourage participation by one of the remaining objectors, Florida Crystals.

Opponents claim that the purchase will block completion of other restoration projects. These charges are untrue. This acquisition will allow other designs to be improved and incorporated into projects that benefit the entire Everglades ecosystem. The land being acquired first is strategically located for projects that can be designed and built quickly. One of Florida's most highly regarded hydrologists, Tom Van Lent, believes that even in smaller, more affordable phases, buying large tracts of U.S. Sugar property remains the best, most cost-effective method.

One criticism is the inclusion of 30,000-plus acres of citrus land. That acquisition alone will provide 18,000 acres for water storage and treatment of pollution in the C-139 Basin. Another 3,500 acres in the S-4 basin will reduce back-pumping from sugar cane fields that poisons the lake.

If we let this chance slip away, U.S. Sugar could auction its vast land holdings to buyers who already are pushing dangerous plans for landfills, rock mines and massive commercial developments in the middle of the Everglades. We urge the opponents to join us in support of this purchase.

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Editor's note: Thom Rumberger is chairman of the Everglades Trust.