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EDITORIAL: Buy the U.S. Sugar land

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Palm Beach Post Editorial

Tuesday, May 12, 2009

There's an admittedly high price to pay for buying large swaths of U.S. Sugar land. It's worth paying, however, because the South Florida Water Management District - not private sugar growers - would control the future of the Everglades.

The governing board will decide today whether the district should pay \$536 million for 73,000 acres. The district would pay a premium to shrink the deal from a purchase of 180,000 acres for \$1.34 billion. Buying less land now, while retaining the opportunity to buy more, would reduce the district's debt at a time of economic hardship. But to improve the deal, the district must meet the modest demands of officials in Hendry County.



U.S. Sugar deal

Because of inaction by Gov. Crist, who has championed the buyout to strengthen his environmental record for a U.S. Senate run, the area that would be hurt by the loss of U.S. Sugar jobs has had no representative on the district board since the deal was announced in June. Yet for the first time, Hendry officials are not actively opposing the buyout. The new deal, they say, gives them more time to prepare for job losses. During that time, they want a reasonable commitment from the state to help them survive the departure of the company that built Clewiston.

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One proposal is for the water district to open an office in Clewiston. Another is to four-lane a 22-mile stretch of State Road 80 through Hendry County, the only two-lane stretch between West Palm Beach and Fort Myers. Most significantly, they want the state to back a Scripps-like jobs program to provide \$5 million a year for 10 years. All of them make sense.

The governing board also can sweeten this deal by insisting that district staff finally move forward on swaps critical to getting all the land needed for water storage south of Lake Okeechobee. While storage and treatment north of the lake is important, the district contends correctly that it can't find enough willing sellers to clean runoff before it pollutes Lake Okeechobee. The land south of the lake will hold the water and siphon it into treatment areas, where it can be cleaned and pumped into the Everglades. The opportunity to convert cane land is so unexpected that the state-federal Everglades restoration plan doesn't contemplate it. The opportunity is unlikely to recur if U.S. Sugar sells to private owners.

To assure that it can trade with Florida Crystals, which owns thousands of acres south of the lake, the district has retained a right to buy more U.S. Sugar land at \$7,400 an acre for three years. The U.S. Sugar soil is richer than Florida Crystals' land, making trades more likely.

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The governing board, which voted 4-3 for the larger purchase in December, might reject this proposal. That would be bad for the Everglades and the public. Aside from providing natural habitat, the Everglades is critical to meeting South Florida's urban water needs. The current Everglades restoration plan relies on a massive commitment to the untried practice of storing water underground. Early tests have not been encouraging.

Governing board members who don't want this deal will have to answer this question: If not U.S. Sugar land at this price now, what land at what price when?

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