

A better Glades deal

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The scaled-down proposal for restoration of the Everglades that South Florida water managers approved this week shows that pragmatism is not always the enemy of the ideal.

The state was forced to cut its buyout of U.S. Sugar farmland because of declining tax revenues. But the leaner deal that emerged is more affordable to taxpayers, easier to manage and still ambitious enough to jump-start the revival of Florida's River of Grass.

The fourth and latest strategy falls far short of the vision Gov. Charlie Crist outlined last year. It calls for the state to spend \$536 million for 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land. While the scale of the buyout is less than half what the governor originally proposed, it is a manageable price in this down economy. And the sizeable swath of farmland will allow the decadeslong restoration effort to begin anew.

Florida was looking at years, anyway, to line up federal and state funding for the restoration work. State and federal officials also need time to engineer the water projects. Under the new deal, the South Florida Water Management District would still have options to purchase the remaining 107,000 acres. The deal includes an exclusive, three-year option to purchase the property at a fixed price of \$7,400 an acre, and the first right of refusal for the seven years following should U.S. Sugar get another offer. The company has agreed to pay three times the price Crist originally negotiated to lease back the farmland and be responsible for controlling pollution on the property.

The deal vastly improves on the terms Crist outlined only 11 months ago in other ways as well. By phasing in the land purchase, the state has time to act as the economy recovers. That should help ensure that the water management district does not get distracted from overseeing South Florida's water supply as it pursues the Everglades work.

The phase-in also gives the farming communities in the Lake Okeechobee basin time to retrain workers and build a new tax base. And the deal extends until June 2010 the deadline Florida has to back out should the revenue picture worsen.

The state's approval also sends the right signal to Washington. President Barack Obama has shown a commitment to restore the federal government as an equal partner in the Everglades cost-sharing plan. His 2010 budget unveiled this month bumped Everglades spending to \$279 million, on top of the \$183 million provided in March and another \$96 million in federal stimulus money. By the district moving forward with the land buy, the state demonstrates its own commitment to strengthening its partnership with the federal government. That is the only way, over the long haul, this restoration plan will work.