

SFW

FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 2008

Compiled by: South Florida Water Management District
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Water district confident it can handle debt of U.S. Sugar deal

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06/26/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and ELIOT KLEINBERG

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and ELIOT KLEINBERG-Palm Beach Post

Less than a year ago, South Florida water managers were forced to delay one of their most pressing environmental projects because they feared they might not have the money to pay for it.

There was too much uncertainty about how state-mandated property tax cuts might affect the South Florida Water Management District's \$1.3 billion budget, they said in July after postponing a \$250 million reservoir meant to protect the St. Lucie River from polluted runoff.

But on Thursday, water managers said they were confident they can come up with \$1.75 billion to purchase 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp.

District Executive Director Carol Wehle said her agency's financial future has become clearer since it delayed construction on the runoff-capturing reservoir near Indiantown. She said she feels 'much more comfortable' taking on debt than she was last year. That's because water managers now know how much revenue they will lose as a result of a tax-cutting constitutional amendment the state's voters approved in January. Also, financial markets have calmed recently, Wehle said. 'It is a much more stable market and much more inviting to public finance than it was a year ago,' she said. Under the deal that Gov. Charlie Crist announced Tuesday, water managers say they will pay as much as \$1.75 billion for U.S. Sugar's land and assets - the maximum the district can afford, Wehle said. U.S. Sugar can continue farming the property rent-free for as long six years.

On Wednesday, the district's chief financial officer, Paul Dumars, said U.S. Sugar's ability to remain on the land for six years would be worth \$500 million, bringing the deal's total price tag to roughly \$2.2 billion.

That figure is incorrect, Wehle said Thursday, and the district still doesn't know what the total cost will be.

Water managers have not conducted independent appraisals of U.S. Sugar's property and don't know exactly what it's worth, she said. They also need to review U.S. Sugar's internal financial documents before they can determine the value of continuing to farm.

Then the two sides will negotiate the final terms.

Robert Coker, a senior vice president for U.S. Sugar, said he was surprised to see the \$2.2 billion figure. 'I have been involved on this thing, and nothing has surprised me in the last eight months until I saw that number,' Coker said. 'What we have agreed to

is \$1.75 billion at closing, and we are going to operate the business for six years. ... We would not have done this deal for less than that.' In late January, U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Buker estimated the worth of the company's land and other assets, including its sugar mill and refinery, at more than \$2.5 billion. He made that statement while defending the company's rejection of a \$575 million buyout offer.

As a privately held company, U.S. Sugar does not release financial records. But a 2006 report by Hoovers Inc., which provides financial information on numerous companies, said U.S. Sugar had annual sales, in sugar alone, of \$430 million.

Water managers plan to use \$50 million from the district's reserves to buy out the sugar giant. The district would borrow the remaining \$1.7 billion by issuing certificates of participation, which are similar to bonds.

Unlike some other forms of government debt, the certificates can be issued without a voter referendum. The district's nine-member board, appointed by the governor, will ultimately vote on whether to take on the debt.

Sherry Lee, who represents Cut Unfair Taxes and Spending, a nonprofit citizens organization in Palm Beach County that targets government waste, said she has serious concerns about the hefty price tag. 'I think it is a mistake,' Lee said. 'Just because it is a good idea doesn't mean it is doable. It might be a nice idea ... but can the people afford it?' But former U.S. Sen. Bob Smith, R-N.H., who shepherded a mammoth Everglades restoration plan through Congress eight years ago, said the gains from the deal will more than justify the price.

Much of the money already spent on the restoration will be wasted if the district cannot move the lake's water south to the Everglades. 'When you own the land, you control true comprehensive restoration,' said Smith, who now lives in Sarasota. 'I believe that it is the right thing to do. We have to think of our children and our grandchildren. I believe that the positive outweighs the negative.'

U.S. Sugar deal carries some long-term costs

06/27/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid and William E. Gibson

Andy Reid and William E. Gibson-South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The \$1.75 billion deal for taxpayers to buy out U.S. Sugar Corp. and clear the way for Everglades restoration could come with a long-term price tag that is twice as high.

The eventual cost of the deal announced Tuesday could hit \$3.5 billion, based on interest payments during a proposed 30-year financing plan.

That still does not include the multimillion-dollar costs to transform sugar cane fields into places to store, clean and move water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. The plans to finance the purchase of U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres with bonds backed by property taxes paid in the 16-county region that stretches from Orlando to the Keys. Interest payments, like those in a home mortgage, over the life of the deal could make the final payment a far cry from the number Crist touted Tuesday.

The cost is worth the environmental reward of re-establishing the 'missing link' between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, district board member Shannon Estenoz said Thursday. 'Financing something over the long haul is about spreading costs out,' Estenoz said. 'It's a pretty standard choice for purchasing something you don't have the cash for.' The final sales price for the U.S. Sugar land remains subject to months of negotiations.

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The district's governing board on Monday is expected to ratify the negotiating principles agreed to between the state and U.S. Sugar. The board will also be asked to authorize the independent appraisals and begin contract negotiations. The goal is to close the deal by Nov. 30.

The \$1.75 billion proposed price was based on U.S. Sugar appraisals and preliminary district estimates. While it remains subject to independent appraisals, it was a 'consensus' reached after months of negotiations with the state, U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert Coker said Thursday. 'That was pretty much the low end of what we thought the value was,' Coker said. If the deal remains at \$1.75 billion, the district expects to pay up to \$117 million a year to cover the debt on the bonds. Over 30 years, that comes to about \$3.5 billion. 'It's like buying a mortgage,' said John Carrig, a financial adviser for Gold Coast Financial Planning. 'You are paying the interest.' The federal government, which has yet to deliver on a 2000 agreement to split Everglades improvement costs, could help pay for the land to diminish the long-term cost, Estenez said. 'Their track record has not been great. It needs to get better,' she said. Florida members of Congress are striving to obtain federal restoration funds, though the land deal could transform the ways that funding would be spent.

The House Appropriations Committee has designated \$195 million for Everglades restoration next fiscal year, but it is unclear if any of the money could be used to help finance the U.S. Sugar deal.

South Florida members of Congress said the land deal will strengthen their case for federal spending. 'This is a huge benefit,' said U.S. Rep. , D-Weston, a member of the House Appropriations Committee. 'What it shows our colleagues across the country is that Florida is very, very serious about restoration. It's an incredibly good opportunity from an environmental standpoint. 'We'll pursue the projects we're funding already,' she said. 'We'll see those things through. I don't expect we would need to redirect those funds.' U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, whose district includes much of the Everglades, said it's much too soon to tell whether the plan would prompt a shift in priorities. 'In some areas of funding, there may be some flexibility,' he said. 'It's too soon to tell until we get some details. It's commendable, though, for the governor and the industry to be talking.' One question is whether the land deal will leave enough money to make the long-delayed improvements the Everglades needs, said Joette Lorion, spokeswoman for the Miccosukee Tribe. The governor's proposal relies on paying for the U.S. Sugar land with bonds once intended to finance a host of water treatment and storage areas. The tribe contends that using that money leaves the improvements in doubt. 'We just don't know where the money is going to come from,' Lorion said. 'You need to clean that water. Just buying the land isn't going to do that.' The district contends it can do the deal without raising taxes. Paying the debt of the U.S. Sugar deal would claim about a fifth of the \$522 million annual property tax revenue the water management agency generates, said Tom Olliff, the district's assistant executive director.

Refinancing during the course of the deal could bring down the final payment. Selling off U.S. Sugar assets the district doesn't plan to use such as its sugar mill and citrus plant is another way to pay off the debt sooner.

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ONLINE Take an interactive tour through Florida's unique River of Grass.

Sun-Sentinel.com/everglades

U.S. Sugar leaves Everglades

06/26/2008

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Donna Block-Daily Deal

The state of Florida has negotiated itself a very sweet deal.

U.S. Sugar Corp., the country's largest producer of cane sugar, agreed Tuesday to sell its 187,000 acres of farmland in the Everglades to the Sunshine State for \$1.75 billion and then go out of business.

The deal is meant to restore the Everglades by increasing the natural water flow from Lake Okeechobee, in the middle of the state, south to Florida Bay. Commercial farming had interrupted flow from what has been dubbed the "River of Grass", damaging the ecosystem.

Environmental groups say it would be the largest such restoration in the country's history. Announced Tuesday by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and Robert H. Buker Jr. chief executive of U.S. Sugar, the deal calls for the South Florida Water Management District to acquire the Everglades acreage, as well as U.S. Sugar's sugar and citrus processing plants. Consideration for the deal is reportedly for a payment of \$50 million in cash and for the state to sell \$1.7 billion in bond-like debt to cover the balance.

The deal is still tentative, but officials hope to sign an agreement by September. Once in place, U.S. Sugar would be allowed to continue farming the 187,000 acres of land for six more years before closing down permanently.

Crist said the deal is "as monumental as the creation of our nation's first national park, Yellowstone."

He added that if the deal is successful, it will be the largest conservation purchase in the history of the state of Florida.

Buker also called the agreement "monumental" but noted he was saddened at the thought of a deal that would effectively end his company's long history of farming in the Everglades.

U.S. Sugar said in a statement that the "majority of our stockholders have held this investment for many decades, and many of our employees' families have worked on our farms and in our sugar factories for generations."

But Buker said he was also heartened that it could resolve some of the state's most serious environmental issues.

The company said the deal will enable it to fulfill its long-term existing business obligations. During the transition period, BMO Capital Markets Corp. will act as financial adviser to U.S. Sugar. The six-year period will also allow employees and communities around Lake Okeechobee to adjust.

Sugar, however, will continue to be produced in the Everglades. At least 250,000 acres of land used by other companies would remain in sugar production.

The end of 77-year-old U.S. Sugar, however, will leave only Florida Crystals Corp., the agribusiness controlled by the Fanjul family, as the last player in what has been known as Big Sugar. In 2001 the Fanjuls bought Domino Sugar Corp. for \$180 million.

General Motors executive Charles Stuart Mott founded U.S. Sugar in 1931. The Mott family, also famous for apple juice, holds much of the private company. It produces about 10% of the nation's sugar and has 1,700 employees. The U.S. domestic sugar industry has thrived under the protection of import quotas and the benefits of farm subsidies that consumer rights groups say result in U.S. consumers paying artificially inflated prices for sugar.

The company has always been popular in its headquarters of Clewiston, Fla., known as "The World's Sweetest Town.". But labor activists have accused it of mistreating its workers, and environmental activists blame the firm for destroying the Everglades and dumping fertilizer into the waterways.

In addition to the refinery and mill based in Clewiston, the state will also buy its 30,000 acres of orange groves and citrus processing plant.

The company is the largest supplier of not-from-concentrate juice to Tropicana.

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\$2.2 billion price to buy farmland near Everglades 'mistaken' number

06/26/2008

News-Press

news-press.com

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The \$2.2 billion price tag to acquire 300 square miles of farmland was a mistaken number that state water managers used shortly after the potential deal was announced.

Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, apologized during a 4:30 p.m. news conference today with the media.

"It's our fault," she said. "We're willing to bring \$1.75 billion to the table. It's the maximum we have the ability to bring to the table. There is no value on that (land) right now."

U.S. Sugar Corp. owns the land, which would be used to store and cleanse water before it heads to the Everglades. The company is having an appraisal done, just as the state is.

The tentative agreement between the country's largest sugar company and the state will give U.S. Sugar six years to continue operating if a deal is struck before closing.

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Glades Deal Can Save Our Coasts

06/26/2008

TBO.com

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Tampa Tribune

The deal announced Tuesday by Gov. Charlie Crist for the state to buy 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land south of Lake Okeechobee and put it back into natural marsh is epic both in the size of the parcel and the impact it will have on the environment in South Florida.

Agriculture - not only the sugar companies, but also cattle ranches and citrus - largely transformed the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers into open sewers for the runoff from vast acreage of flat country around the lake, most of which was wetlands before the draglines arrived.

By draining the marsh country - at the time thought of as transforming waste land to useful, productive acreage - the corporate farmers cut off the natural flow of water out of the lake and into the sprawling wetlands that stretched south to what is now Everglades National Park.

What had been the natural kidney of the enormous ecosystem was eliminated. The two rivers, the St. Lucie running to the east coast and exiting at Stuart and the Caloosahatchee running to the west coast and exiting at San Carlos Bay, became drains not only for the natural rainfall coming down the Kissimmee Valley, but also for all the agricultural runoff from all those areas.

The St. Lucie was the first to show the impact. For decades, yellow, foaming water has poured through the locks and rushed into the estuaries of the lower Indian River, one of the state's premier snook fisheries. Gradually, the Indian River Lagoon, once clear and carpeted with grass, became a cloudy, algae-ridden morass for miles on either side of the outflow. Fish by the thousands developed lesions brought on by the bacterial stew. And the fishing, though still good, is a shadow of what it was.

The Caloosahatchee, a larger flow, seemed somewhat immune to the impact of the poor water quality until the last 10 years or so, when it began to develop horrendous algae blooms. It is now a filthy open sewer many months of the year, and the water pours into the estuary at San Carlos Bay, fouling the water for miles. The Caloosahatchee is important not only as a snook and tarpon fishery, but it also has one of the few known sawfish hatchery areas in its lower reaches.

Opening up the marshes south of the lake would allow some of this bad water to be diverted into the sheet flow south toward the Everglades. And as it eased through miles of sawgrass marshes and lily pad holes, the water would be filtered and cleaned. By the time it reached the tributary creeks of Florida Bay, it would again be clean, fresh water - just what the brackish fisheries of the upper Everglades need to thrive.

Tarpon, snook and redfish all depend on a mix of clean fresh water and saltwater in the early stages of their life cycle, as do hundreds of other organisms. This project should bring the vast "River of Grass" back to a condition it has not approached in 80 years.

Along the way, it would create tens of thousands of acres of live wetlands, where wading birds, waterfowl, snail kites, gators and bass will thrive.

Just as importantly, the vast water storage areas available would put an end to the need for "backpumping" from farmlands into Lake Okeechobee, a horrible process environmentally because it put millions of gallons of water laced with fertilizer, pesticides and suspended muck into the big lake, decimating the once magnificent sport fishing for bass and panfish.

It is a project so big, covering almost 300 square miles, that most environmental groups did not even have it on their wish list. It was an impossible dream, but it appears about to come true thanks to a governor who appears to be truly "green" despite drawing fire from some for his recent stance on Gulf oil drilling, and to key legislators, the South Florida Water Management District and the cooperating U.S.

Sugar Company.

Once in a lifetime

06/26/2008

Gainesville Sun, The

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The \$1.75 billion plan, formally announced Tuesday by Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar officials, would provide the state with 187,000 acres - roughly 300 square miles - in the heart of the Everglades.

The land would help restore the natural flow of the Everglades from Lake Okeechobee south to Florida Bay. That flow has been blocked for decades by farming and development, which also have polluted the wetlands with fertilizer-laden runoff and other contaminants.

If an agreement is reached, the acquisitions will accelerate a moribund Everglades restoration program, which has been stalled by a lack of land and a shortage of funding. It will reduce the cost of the \$10 billion program by providing land for water storage, rendering moot original plans to create hundreds of expensive underground wells.

The deal would also help solve a problem with pollution from Lake Okeechobee. The lake now collects water tainted with fertilizer and manure runoff from agricultural lands to the north; when the lake's level gets too high in the rainy season, water is released eastward via the St. Lucie River and westward via the Caloosahatchee River. As a result the rivers' estuaries are fouled, and the Caloosahatchee's pollution has been cited as feeding red tide in the Gulf.

The U.S. Sugar land might enable the lake's overflow, once cleaned, to be released into the Everglades.

How to clean the Okeechobee overflow is only one of the questions surrounding the U.S. Sugar deal, and it is far from the most pressing.

Some of the more basic questions are:

Is \$1.75 billion a fair price? The state will have its own appraisal done.

How would the state pay for the purchase? The Legislature struggled this year to fill a \$2 billion gap in state revenues, necessitating cuts in school funding and other essentials. And Florida's tax-generating economy is not expected to improve substantially any time soon.

What becomes of U.S. Sugar's 1,700 employees and the South Florida cities like Clewiston whose existence is tied to cane farming?

What effect would the massive acquisition have on the state's sensitive-lands buying program?

There is time for those questions to be answered. Negotiations between the state and U.S. Sugar will continue, with an eye toward closing the deal in September. If an agreement is reached, U.S. Sugar would continue its operations for at least six years before turning over its land and other assets to the state.

What is clear now is that, in acquiring U.S. Sugar, the state would eventually remove a business that historically has been a major source of the Everglades' pollution and a beneficiary of ill-advised federal price supports.

More important, the state has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to undo much of the

damage inflicted on the Everglades and other critical elements of Florida's environment.

As costly and complicated as this deal is, Florida can't afford to say no.

Opining on the U.S. Sugar Deal

06/26/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

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Gov. Charlie Crist's decision to purchase U.S. Sugar Corp. to help restore the Florida Everglades was big news that caught the attention of editorial boards accross the state. Most of the state's newspapers weighed in with their opinions. Some, naturally, were more engaging and insightful han others. Check the links below to see how the issue played in various parts of the state.

BEST OF THE BUNCH

The Gainesville Sun Simply written but effective.

The Miami Herald Through job. Nice take on disparate voices uniting on the deal.

The Palm Beach Post Detailed and effective in laying out next steps and potential pitfalls.

Tallahassee Democrat Easy to understand. Nice use of an appropriate metaphor in describing the Everglades.

SAVE FOR A.M. COFFEE BREAK

OPINION'S THERE BUT TOUGH READS

Daytona Beach News-Journal Informative but the writing is detailed to the point of distraction.

Tampa Tribune Informative but a little too rah-rah about Gov. Charlie Crist.

POSTED IN: Lead Editorial (1) Discuss this entry

Our view Hope for the 'Glades

06/27/2008

Florida Today

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Gov. Charlie Crist's historic \$1.75 billion bid to reclaim a huge chunk of the Everglades by buying out U.S. Sugar -- if it plays out right -- would be an enormous step forward in restoring the mighty River of Grass.

The deal is far from settled, but calls for the purchase of 187,000 acres of the sugarcane producer's land south of Lake Okeechobee and restoring the natural flow of water southward to the Everglades.

And despite its high price, could mean tremendous cost savings. 'It may prove to be much cheaper to have purchased (the land) than to try to fix the Everglades with Big Sugar standing right in the way,' says Jim Egan of the Marine Resources Council of East Florida in Palm Bay.

State environmental groups are hailing the proposal as a monumental victory not just for the Everglades, but also for the St. Lucie River, now used as a toxic drainpipe for releases from Okeechobee.

That's where Brevard County's Indian River Lagoon comes into the picture.

The state's agreement 'will have a long term benefit to the south Indian River Lagoon, particularly the St. Lucie Estuary, which has been impaired by freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee,' says Ed Garland of the St. Johns River Water Management District.

And stormwater runoff and agricultural chemicals funneled into its south end from the St. Lucie contribute to the declining health of the lagoon, where dolphin and other marine life increasingly are ravaged by disease and infection.

That's why we hope the land purchase -- which includes a six-year transition of ownership of land and company assets -- can be pulled off by state negotiators.

But only after potential drawbacks that can't be ignored get some tough scrutiny.

Those include:

Tradeoffs that could harm the IRL in the short term.

That's because money previously set aside to build stormwater treatment areas and reservoirs east of Lake Okeechobee to filter water before it reaches the lagoon could be used for the land purchase, delaying those needed projects.

Sheer cost. Pegged initially at \$1.75 billion by Crist, the price tag for the deal has already jumped to \$2.2 billion, according to the South Florida Water Management District.

That's supposed to come at no extra cost to the state because SFWMD would pay off a loan for the project annually using existing property taxes -- but what happens if costs continue to climb?

State appraisers must put the purchase under the microscope. U.S. Sugar, which has benefited for years from huge government tax breaks, shouldn't be given too sweet a deal.

Not letting Washington off the hook for its share of Everglades cleanup costs.

Half the price for the \$8 billion restoration plan approved by Congress in 2000 was to be paid by the federal government, with Florida picking up the rest.

But so far Florida has ponied up \$2.4 billion, while the feds have chipped in a puny \$4 million. That has delayed work and raised estimated costs for completing the project by almost a third to \$11 billion.

Crist's deal can't become just another excuse for the federal government to short Florida on its pledge

Instead its potential cost-savings should motivate Congress to pay up, so restoration work can move more quickly.

Editorial Everglades dream coming true?

06/27/2008

Jupiter Courier

Stuart News

The tentative deal to purchase land from U.S. Sugar rekindles hope for Everglades

The Dream. For Floridians who care deeply about the Everglades the remarkable, mysterious, but troubled, ecosystem that once used to cover 4 million acres in the heart of South Florida the dream has always been to restore and preserve this natural (and national) treasure.

Michael Grunwald hinted at the dream in his book, 'The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida and the Politics of Paradise,' when he wrote: 'Everglades activists still dream of converting the sugar fields into reservoirs, and perhaps even flow ways reconnecting Lake Okeechobee to the River of Grass.'

In a perfect world, the natural flow of sheet water from Lake O to Florida Bay would be restored. And the Everglades, long the stepchild of agricultural and developmental interests, would receive all the water required to rejuvenate itself.

Such was the dream. But the reality of Everglades restoration has always been a lot more mundane and deeply disheartening.

In 2000 Congress passed the Water Resources Development Act, which was designed to fund various aspects of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. However, implementation of both WRDA and CERP has been bogged down by several factors:

Congress failed to provide funding for the federal government's part of WRDA.

Infighting between two federal agencies the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Department of Interior delayed the construction of what has been termed the Modified Water Deliveries System, critical to moving water into Everglades National Park.

The South Florida Water Management District's reluctance to make Everglades restoration a priority over agricultural and developmental needs and interests.

As a result of these and other factors, most Everglades activists had resigned themselves to a restoration process that would be, at best, both interminably long and only partially successful.

But then, suddenly, the dream was rekindled.

The state of Florida's agreement announced Tuesday with U.S. Sugar to purchase 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee was like a lightning bolt from the blue. For the first time in years, environmentalists are discussing the very real possibility of restoring the Everglades.

The sale price for both the land and U.S. Sugar's assets \$1.75 billion is staggering, and will require a mammoth financial commitment by Florida taxpayers. If auditors determine this to be fair market value, it will be money well spent. If additional audits determine the amount is too high, the state should negotiate a lower purchase price.

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Dissolving the company a process to be completed within six years will create financial hardship and uncertainty for the vast majority of U.S. Sugar's 1,700 employees and the communities in which they live. Gov. Charlie Crist, who negotiated the deal with U.S. Sugar, has instructed state agencies to develop an economic transition plan for the area. It's important to make this part of the agreement a high priority.

Ultimately, the tentative deal appears to offer a golden opportunity to restore the Everglades.

'This is inexpressibly wonderful,' said David Guest of Earthjustice, an environmental advocacy group, of the proposed land deal.

'Inexpressibly wonderful'?

That's how people talk when dreams come true.

RESTORING THE EVERGLADES

Potential benefits of Florida's tentative deal with U.S. Sugar:

Huge increases in the availability of water storage, significantly reducing the potential for harmful discharges from Lake Okeechobee to coastal rivers and estuaries when lake levels are high.

The ability to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades during dry times and greater water storage to protect the natural system during wet years.

Keeping thousands of tons of phosphorus out of the Everglades each year.

Eliminating the need for 'back-pumping' water into Lake Okeechobee.

Additional water storage alternatives, relieving some pressure on the Herbert Hoover Dike while the federal government undertakes repairs.

Sustainability of agriculture and green energy production.

South Florida Water Management District

Everglades and the Big Sugar deal of the century

06/27/2008

Orlando Sentinel

Thomas, Mike

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Is it a buyout or a bailout?

The official line from Gov. Charlie Crist's office is that it was his bright idea to buy out U.S. Sugar for \$1.8 billion. Supposedly, jaws hit the ground, light bulbs went off and the greatest deal in environmental history went down.

I had some fun with this in today's column.

But let me add that I think a lot of it is, well, crap.

Maybe Charlie did throw the idea out. But I do not believe, for one second, that U.S. Sugar didn't have selling out on its mind when it went to negotiate with the state on its future operations. Nobody pulls a rabbit out of a hat that Big Sugar hasn't already considered being there. The company was facing growing costs to clean up its pollution. And the future of its federal price guarantees is by no means guaranteed. This is the opportune time to bail and U.S. Sugar knows it.

I can't say who thought of the idea first or who said it first. I do know that politically, it couldn't look like it came from U.S. Sugar because that would have smelled more like a bailout.

The same thing happened on Lake Apopka years ago. The state planned to enforce stricter environmental protections around the lake, which would have cost the muck farms bordering it a bundle. And so they sold out to the state for a fortune. And later we found out much of the land was contaminated with chemicals and pesticides, which cause a huge bird kill when water managers flooded it.

By and large, the farmers played the state for fools and made a fortune doing it.

There should be a lesson here in paying top dollar for bailing out a stressed business. Doing it without due diligence made matters worse.

I do not disagree that the U.S. Sugar land is necessary for the Everglades. I do wonder if it is worth more than \$9,000 an acre. The land has subsided several feet, the consequence of being severed from the marsh. This means you can't simply turn it into a huge marsh and flow water down into the Everglades from Lake Okeechobee. There will have to be levees, pumps and all kinds of engineering solutions to move water in and out of any reservoirs or marshes built on this property.

The \$1.8 billion is just the beginning.

And the state had better send out an army of sample takers and test every square foot of that property because I guarantee you that if the Apopka farm land was contaminated, then this will be too.

That that has to be taken into consideration in the price.

The Everglades

06/27/2008

Evansville Courier & Press

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With as much fanfare and publicity as possible, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and representatives from U.S. Sugar and the South Florida Water Management District announced that the state would purchase 187,000 acres of land, plus equipment, a railroad spur and a mining operation, from U.S. Sugar for about \$1.7 billion.

Those who have long seen the sugar cane and agricultural lands in the Everglades Agricultural Area as the 'missing link' between Lake Okeechobee and the 'River of Grass' were euphoric about the purchase, seeing it as the way to re-create the water flow between the lake and the Everglades via a managed system of reservoirs and wetlands.

It is certainly an environmental coup of epic proportions, and we applaud the transaction as a 'once in a generation opportunity.' But for the 1,700 U.S. Sugar workers who depend on this company for their livelihood it is quite a different story, despite the planned six-year transition and the company's payouts to its employees.

Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle told reporters Tuesday that the district would work with the local community, the Florida tourism people and those in economic development to create an economic strategy.

That's all well and good, but this isn't an economically booming area to begin with, and this strategy needs to be well thought out and, more important, implemented as soon as possible. No politics. No posturing.

The state got what it wants with a link between the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee. Now it's time for the state and its leaders, both within the Florida Legislature and Congress, to step up and make sure that new life for the Everglades doesn't signal the death of the economy just north of it.

Ducks Unlimited Applauds Florida For Everglades Purchase

06/26/2008

Ducks Unlimited

Ducks Unlimited

The state of Florida plans to purchase 187,000 acres of Everglades

MEMPHIS, Tenn. June 25, 2008 - Ducks Unlimited, the leader in wetland habitat conservation, acknowledges the purchase of 187,000 acres of Everglades by the state of Florida as a significant milestone in conservation. Purchasing the land from U.S. Sugar Corporation, the \$1.7 billion purchase is crucial to the South Florida wetland ecosystem.

This deal covers an area of more than 292 square miles and is perhaps the most important wetlands restoration opportunity ever presented, said Dr. Alan Wentz, group manager of conservation and communications with Ducks Unlimited. No single wetland has captured the American public's imagination so much as the Everglades. This purchase gives us the chance to restore one of the greatest ecosystems on our continent and we hope the resources can be found to make that happen as quickly as possible.

The purchase, which will restore the freshwater flow into Lake Okeechobee, is considered a critical link to restoring the vast wetlands of South Florida. Development, flood control projects and agricultural runoff have led to the Everglades depletion over the years and more than 35 percent of the natural wetlands have been drained. It is the largest subtropical wilderness in the United States and is

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home to rare and endangered species such as the American crocodile and Florida panther, among several species of waterfowl.

This purchase is outstanding for wetland habitat conservation and will benefit waterfowl and other water birds throughout the region, Wentz explained. The South Florida Water Management District recognizes the benefits of wetlands for wildlife and people and this is an excellent example.

With more than a million supporters, Ducks Unlimited is the worlds largest and most effective wetland and waterfowl conservation organization with more than 12 million acres conserved. The United States alone has lost more than half of its original wetlands - natures most productive ecosystem - and continues to lose more than 80,000 wetland acres each year.

Rivers Coalition signals backing for U.S. Sugar buyout

06/26/2008

Jupiter Courier

Tyler Treadway

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Tyler Treadway - Stuart NEws

STUART The Rivers Coalition, a Treasure Coast environmental group that has sued the federal government to stop discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie Estuary, unanimously approved a resolution Thursday supporting a deal between the state and U.S. Sugar Corp. designed to move the water south instead.

On Tuesday, the South Florida Water Management District and the sugar company signed a statement of principles calling for the state to buy about 187,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area for \$1.8 billion. The land could be used to restore the traditional flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Establishing the flow way also is designed to significantly reduce the amount of water released into the St. Lucie Estuary.

The Rivers Coalition is in full support of this acquisition, said Leon Abood, chairman of the group, providing the last is used for the southern conveyance of water from Lake Okeechobee.

But Abood said its too early for the group to consider dropping its lawsuit.

The Stuart-based Rivers Coalition, a consortium of local environmental groups, outdoors enthusiasts and fishing clubs, filed a federal lawsuit in November 2006 against the Army Corps of Engineers, which operates the control structures at Lake Okeechobee in an effort to end discharges that in most years send hundreds of billions of gallons of muddy, polluted fresh water into the St. Lucie Estuary.

Over the last couple of days Ive been asked lots of times if were going to drop the lawsuit, Abood said. The answer is unequivocally no. Were going to keep moving forward.

At the same time, Abood said the coalition plans to work closely with government agencies to make sure the southern flow way becomes a reality and to make sure the end result benefits Treasure Coast waterways.

We dont want to take our eyes off local drainage issues, he said.

Gunster Yoakley Advising U.S. Sugar on Massive Florida Land Deal

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06/26/2008

American Lawyer, The

American Lawyer

In the largest land acquisition in Florida history, U.S. Sugar Corporation announced on June 24 that it plans to sell all its assets to the state for \$1.75 billion. The deal means that the 77-year-old sugar manufacturer will go out of business within six years. It's all part of a plan to save the Everglades by adding 187,000 acres of land covering almost 300 square miles to the national park.

Donald Beutenmuller, Jr., the general counsel and former managing partner of Florida's Gunster, Yoakley & Stewart, confirmed that the firm advised U.S. Sugar on the deal. Reached by phone in his West Palm Beach office, Beutenmuller says the Clewiston, Fla.-based sugar manufacturer has been a longtime client of the firm.

Gunster business litigation partner David Atkinson served as lead counsel to U.S. Sugar. (Atkinson did not respond to a request for comment by the time of this posting.)

The deal doesn't completely end sugar production in the Everglades. Other manufacturers will continue their operations on 250,000 acres of land on the northern border of the Everglades.

Besides the land transfer, U.S. Sugar also will divest itself of two sugar refineries and 200 miles of railroad. The company, which has struggled with debt and rising costs in recent years, will be given six years to wind down its operations. The South Florida Water Management District will assume control of the land and the state plans on financing the purchase through a combination of bonds and fees added to water bills.

The deal is a coup for Florida Governor Charlie Crist, a Republican vice presidential hopeful, as the state and U.S. Sugar have long butted heads over alleged environmental damage caused by the company's farming activities in the Everglades region.

One potential obstacle facing the deal is a federal class action suit filed in January by three former U.S. Sugar employees. While a class has not yet been certified, lead plaintiffs counsel Curtis Miner of Coral Gables's Colson Hicks Eidson says the recent deal with the state proves that shares given to former U.S. Sugar employees were grossly undervalued. (U.S. Sugar is privately owned with roughly 1,700 employees owning about 35 percent of the company through an employee stock ownership plan, Miner says.)

'If the math I've seen is correct, the current deal values [U.S. Sugar] shares at about \$350,' says Miner, adding that his clients' shares were valued at roughly \$180 per share. 'So the company didn't double in value overnight but the stock somehow did.'

The class action lists U.S. Sugar, company chairman William White, CEO Robert Buker, Jr., and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation--the company's principal shareholder--as defendants. Representing U.S. Sugar is Gunster litigation counsel Curtis Alva. Alston & Bird ERISA chair H. Douglas Hinson and ERISA partner Patrick DiCarlo represent White along with Christopher Duke from West Palm Beach litigation boutique Schwarzberg Spector Duke & Rogers. Greenberg Traurig partners David Coulson, Hilarie Bass, and Todd Wozniak are representing Buker while White & Case litigation partners David Draigh and Rudolph Aragon are advising the Flint, Mich.-based Mott Foundation.

None of the firms above responded to requests for comment.

Everglades purchase may threaten existing project

06/26/2008

Miami Herald - Online

RASHA MADKOUR

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RASHA MADKOUR-Miami herald

WELLINGTON, Fla. -- A new Everglades land deal could undermine an existing water project that has already cost the state millions of dollars.

Gov. Charlie Crist announced a \$1.75 billion deal on Tuesday to purchase 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp., but the deal could cause a multimillion-dollar reservoir under construction in western Palm Beach County to become obsolete before it's finished.

The state has already invested about \$250 million in the project, but finishing the reservoir might not fit into the new plan of letting water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

The South Florida Water Management District stopped work on the reservoir earlier this month, claiming it had to resolve a lawsuit with an environmental group challenging how the reservoir water would be used. But Brad Sewell, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the purpose of the lawsuit was to guarantee the reservoir water went to the Everglades, not to stop construction.

District officials maintain that the lawsuit - not the pending land deal - stopped construction.

Sweet Deal for Everglades

06/26/2008

Bond Buyer - Bradenton Bureau, The
Sigo, Shelly

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See attachment for copy

Crist Reveals a New Strategy to Help Restore the Everglades; SSCF, PURRE React to Announcement

06/26/2008

Island Reporter
Vaynberg, Ida

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Crist reveals a new strategy to help restore the Everglades; SCCF, PURRE react to announcement

By IDA VAYNBERG, ivaynberg@breezenewspapers.com

Erick Lindblad, right, Executive Director of SCCF, is pictured with South Florida Water Management District Governing Board Vice Chair Shannon Estenoz at the Governor's press conference on June 24 announcing the purchase of 187,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA).

Florida Governor Charlie Crist made history on Tuesday when he along with the United States Sugar Corporation, some of the state's elected officials and various environmental agencies revealed a plan to acquire one of the largest portions of land in the nation's history. This is being done in order to begin the long awaited process of restoring the Everglades and to bring relief to our coastal estuaries.

Crist has asked the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to begin negotiating an agreement with U.S. Sugar Corporation to acquire 187,000 acres of agricultural land owned by them.

This land will be used in an effort to revive the connection between Lake Okeechobee and the fabled "River of Grass" by establishing a managed system of storage and treatment to help protect the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers and estuaries.

"We have an opportunity to provide the critical missing link in our restoration activities," said Crist. "I can envision no better gift to the Everglades, or the people of Florida, or to our country than to place in public ownership this missing link that represents the key to true restoration."

The proposed agreement will involve the public purchase approximately 300 square miles of land that span four counties in the southern part of the state. Pending approval by its Governing Board, the District will pay \$1.75 billion in cash and certificates to take ownership of the land as well as the company's assets that include 200 miles of railroad, a state-of-the-art sugar mill, sugar refinery and citrus processing plant.

A "Statement of Principles," providing a framework of the potential acquisition, was signed by the District's Governing Board Vice Chair Shannon Estenoz and U.S. Sugar President and CEO Robert H. Buker.

Negotiations on the final agreement are scheduled to take the next few months, with a closing expected before the end of the year.

The proposal will allow U.S. Sugar a six-year transitional period where they will continue to farm and manage land consistent with its current practices. Construction of any new water treatment facilities on the land will most likely begin after the transition period ends.

This acquisition will help the state's water managers a better opportunity to store and clean water, and give a much needed boost to the 30-year State-Federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and the State of Florida's Northern Everglades program to restore and protect our watersheds.

The Everglades once spanned almost 11,000 square miles of the south Florida, filled with freshwater ponds, prairies and forested uplands. Water flowed down the Kissimmee River into Okeechobee, then south through the Everglades to the Florida Bay. Over the years, the marshland was reduced to half its size as it was drained for agriculture, development and flood control.

Its fabled title of the "River of Grass" was given for the tall sawgrass that flourishes in its marshes.

If this deal goes through successfully, it will provide valuable benefits to help restore and maintain this unique environment that supports a vast wildlife and plant community. Benefits include:

- Such large increases in water storage will significantly reduce the potential for harmful releases from Lake Okeechobee into the state's coastal rivers and estuaries.
- It will help provide cleaner water to the Everglades during dry seasons and greater storage capacity will help protect it during the rainy seasons.
- It will help to prevent thousands of tons of phosphorus from entering the Everglades every year.
- It will permanently eliminate the need for "back-pumping" water into Lake Okeechobee from the Everglades Agricultural Area.
- Provide for sustainability of agriculture and green energy production.
- Additional water storage will also help relieve some pressures on the Herbert Hoover Dike and allow the federal government to undertake repairs.

"The significance of this moment will forever be recorded in Florida's environmental history," said Estenoz. "Today, we offer the Everglades restoration opportunities once thought impossible; environmental progress once thought unachievable; and protections just a decade ago believed unattainable."

Local organizations react

Local conservation advocates Erick Lindblad, Executive Director of the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation (SCCF) and Rae Ann Wessel, SCCF Natural Resource Policy Director, attended the announcement on Tuesday. "Restoring flow south out of Lake Okeechobee is the single most critical element of Everglades restoration," explained Wessel. "With this additional land, we gain the potential to store and treat one million acre feet of water, which could eliminate 85 percent of the damaging flows to the Caloosahatchee."

Wessel also said that this deal will make "a significant difference" to the water quality on Sanibel.

"Reduction in excess flows from Lake O will also reduce the nutrient loading from lake water and sediments which have contributed in the past to harmful algal blooms," she added.

Michael Valiquette, Chairman of People United to Restore Our Rivers and Estuaries (PURRE), said that the acquisition is a result of "constant pressure" from organizations like PURRE on the major stakeholders in Tallahassee, SFWMD and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. He said that Sanibel's biggest issues with Lake Okeechobee had been the heavy water releases after storm events and the back-pumping of polluted water from Everglades agricultural area south of the lake. Tuesday's purchase could eliminate as much as 95 percent of the backpumping into our estuaries.

"The PURRE Water Coalition is extremely excited about this. This is a major accomplishment for the environment of Florida. We commend Governor Crist for his initiative to make this happen and his staff," Valiquette said. "This is just one very large piece of the puzzle of water management and we still need to pay attention because there are other areas where pollution is entering the Caloosahatchee River."

Valiquette also pointed out that PURRE would continue to be involved and continue "keeping their eye" on the issue. Their current question is whether the 18,000 acres of land known as the Disston Island Conservancy District (DICD), located southwest of the lake and west of Clewiston, would be a part of the purchase.

DICD is one of the largest sources of nutrients pollution to the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary and is a pumped surface water management system that has been there for over 80 years. It discharges to C-43, and because of that it is not included within the Everglades protection Area. DICD is often allowed to backflow into Lake Okeechobee. Most of the property belongs to U.S. Sugar Corporation.

"That's why that land purchase is so important, because it's a start of things to come," Valiquette added. "It shows that the State of Florida, Governor Charlie Crist, is willing to step up to the plate and do what they have to do to take control of this environmental disaster that we have on our hands."

Wild Idea Gets Everglades Plan Moving Again

06/27/2008

Ledger, The

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By CRAIG PITTMAN-ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

To jump start the stalled \$10 billion Everglades restoration project, Gov. Charlie Crist came up with an idea so wild it took everyone's breath away.

On Tuesday, he announced it would actually happen: Florida will buy every bit of land now owned by the nation's largest sugar company and use it to restore the River of Grass.

Although many details of the \$1.75 billion deal still must be worked out before it closes in November, the bottom line is this: U.S. Sugar will continue farming its land - 187,000 acres, three times the size of Orlando - for six more years, then shut everything down and hand it over to the state.

Under the deal, U.S. Sugar Corp. said, it will sell all its holdings to the state, "including sugarcane land, sugar mill, refinery, citrus plant, citrus nursery, rock mines, railroad and railcars and all equipment." The land is in Hendry, Glades and Palm Beach counties.

Crist said that eight months ago, when he first proposed buying up everything U.S. Sugar owns, "originally there was some surprise" among his staff. "But the more people thought about it, they thought, why not?"

Crist said U.S. Sugar agreed to negotiate after the South Florida Water Management District board voted to stop allowing the company to backpump its farm runoff into heavily polluted Lake Okeechobee.

The board vote followed a federal court decision in favor of Earthjustice and the Florida Wildlife Federation, which had challenged the practice as a violation of the Clean Water Act.

"That got the ball rolling," he said.

Company executives called the decision to sell bittersweet, because it will end more than 70 years of farming there.

U.S. Sugar produces 700,000 tons of sugar a year, or about 10 percent of all sugar produced in the nation. The company, which operates its own railroad, employs 1,700 workers, most of whom live in Clewiston, "the sweetest town in America."

The purchase turns a restoration effort "that was beginning to look stalled by inadequate financial and land capital into an unprecedented opportunity to completely rewrite the course of Everglades restoration," said Jeff Danter, state director of the Nature Conservancy.

The negotiations between the state and U.S. Sugar were so secretive that not even leaders of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers - the state's partner in the Everglades project - knew about the deal until late Tuesday, said Stu Appelbaum, who heads the Everglades restoration program for the Corps.

When state and federal experts were first putting together the restoration plan in the late 1990s, this kind of land purchase was "not something that was ever contemplated or suggested," Appelbaum said. As a result of Tuesday's announcement "the whole landscape has changed."

U.S. Sugar's land will help solve two problems at once, Appelbaum said. It can reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, and halt the flow of pollution from the lake to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, he said.

Historically, the Everglades functioned as a safety valve for the lake. When heavy rains north of the lake sent swollen currents down the Kissimmee River, the river flowed into the lake and filled it until it spilled over.

The spillover then slowly flowed through the wide River of Grass south to Florida Bay.

But in the name of flood control, the corps straightened the Kissimmee's bends, turning it into a funnel for pollution from the farms and ranches north of the lake.

And the Corps built a dike around the rim of the lake, cutting off the flow to the Everglades, which now routinely starves for water.

Meanwhile the lake became a reservoir full of phosphorous and algae blooms.

Whenever it got too full, the Corps and the water district would send the excess flowing east through the St. Lucie River and west through the Caloosahatchee River.

The pollution from the lake wreaked havoc in those rivers' estuaries, harming fishing and tourism on both coasts.

Now the sugar farms can be turned into water storage areas and filter marshes where water from the lake can flow once again into the Everglades, Appelbaum said.

However, to make it work will require more than simply tearing down the dike, because 70 years of farming has drastically depleted the soil there, he said.

And the Corps and the state will have to find a way to clean the pollution from the lake's water first, said Terry Rice, a retired colonel who once oversaw all Corps operations in Florida.

"You can't put anything in the Everglades that's dirty," Rice said. The Everglades is already suffering from too much phosphorous, and adding the lake water to the load won't help, he said.

"Right now," he said, "we're talking about a whole lot of extra water and no way to clean it."

Appelbaum agreed that the lake water is far too filthy to be sent straight into the River of Grass. "It will clearly need treatment," he said. All in all, he said, "we've got a lot of planning to do."

Can the Everglades be Saved

06/26/2008

npr.org

NPR

Everglades National Park ecologist Nick Aumen discusses United States Sugar's deal to sell 187,000 acres of land back to the park.

Follow link for audio: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91906058&ft=1&f=1003>

The Bryant Park Project, June 26, 2008 · Environmentalists have been issuing dire warnings about the deterioration of the Florida Everglades for years, saying these wetlands have to be restored in order to revive fragile ecosystems and increase scarce fresh water supplies. Over half of the Everglades are gone, irreversibly converted to urban or agricultural development.

But this week, in an attempt to save what's left, the state of Florida announced a plan to buy nearly 200,000 acres of former wetlands from a sugar cane producer. Advocates say the plan is the largest restoration project in American history.

Putting the land back into public hands is an important step, says Nick Aumen, an aquatic ecologist at Everglades National Park, but it's a massive project that could take a decade to complete.

The land being purchased is located around the southern shores of Lake Okeechobee, and it's upstream from most of the remaining Everglades. "It gives us more opportunities for restoration than we otherwise would have had," Aumen says.

The Everglades perform a variety of functions essential to the ecosystem, Aumen says. In addition to being the primary habitat of many species, the Everglades work as a giant filter system to provide freshwater and a runoff system that helps to prevent flooding and soil erosion.

Home building, farmland and large numbers of canals that have been constructed since the 1950s have severely damaged the Everglades.

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7 BILLION TO BUY OUT US SUGAR WITH 187,000 ACRES SOUTH OF LAKE OKEECHOBEE OKEECHOBEE.

06/26/2008

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

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NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

GOVERNOR CRIST SAYS HE HOPES TO EXPAND THE RESTORATION PROJECT TO INCLUDE OVER SUGAR PROVIDERS. HE HOSTED A SUMMIT IN MIAMI YESTERDAY. ONE OF THE SPONSORS IS THE STATE'S SECOND BIGGEST SUGAR PRODUCER, FLORIDA CRYSTALS. THE SALE, IF IT IS ONLY USSUGAR, STILL LEAVES SOME POCKETS OWNED BY FLORIDA CRYSTALS AND IT'S ACKNOWLEDGED THEIR WILLINGNESS TO HELP US NEGOTIATE THIS. THE STATE WILL SPEND \$1.7 BILLION TO BUY OUT US SUGAR WITH 187,000 ACRES SOUTH OF LAKE OKEECHOBEE OKEECHOBEE. EXPERTS DOUBT THAT THEY'LL TRY TO BUY OUT FLORIDA CRYSTALS BUT ENGINEER A LAND SWAP. THE PROJECT LEAVING CLOUDY NINE FOR ENVIRONMENTALISTS, PALM BEACH COUNTY SAID THEY EXPECT TO LOSE MORE THAN \$5 MILLION TO ITS COUNTY BUDGET AFTER US SUGAR ANNOUNCED THE DEAL TO SELL THE HOLDINGS TO THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT. WITH PAYMENTS TOTTALLING \$5.4 MILLION IN TWECHB. ONCE THE SALE IS COMPLETE, THE 100,000 ACRES IN WESTERN PALM BEACH BECOMES TAX EXEMPT FOR WATER MANAGEMENT.

CASUALTY OF THE NEW EVERGLADES LAND DEAL. TAXPAYERS

06/26/2008

NewsChannel 5 at 11 PM - WPTV-TV

NewsChannel 5 at 11 PM - WPTV-TV

A MASSIVE RESERVOIR UNDER CONSTRUCTION IN WESTERN PALM BEACH COUNTY COULD BE THE FIRST CASUALTY OF THE NEW EVERGLADES LAND DEAL. TAXPAYERS HAVE ALREADY INVESTED ABOUT 300-MILLION DOLLARS IN WORK TO BEGIN BUILDING THE CITY-SIZED RESERVOIR, WHICH NOW MIGHT NOT BE NEEDED. STATE LEADERS SAY IF THEY OPT NOT TO COMPLETE CONSTRUCTION, IT STILL COULD BE USED AS A WATER TREATMENT AREA THAT CAN FIT IN WITH NEW PLANS.

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Deal in FL Could Boost LA Sugar Products

06/26/2008

KATC-TV

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KATC-TV

The country is celebrating the nation's largest sugar producer giving land back to Florida but those cheering the loudest could be in Louisiana.

187,000 acres of sugar cane is how much Florida could lose if this deal goes through, which could then put Louisiana back to number one in sugar cane production. ' This represents, if we're successful, and I believe we will be, the largest conservation purchase in the history of the State of Florida,' said Governor of Florida, Charlie Crist. Governor of Florida, Charlie Crist announced Wednesday, the State of Florida and the U.S. Sugar Corporation is currently negotiating the sale of 187,000 acres of sugar cane land to help restore the Everglades. A price tag could add up to \$1.75 billion dollars. ' 187,000 acres is a significant amount of acreage that will probably take Florida probably below Louisiana,' said Blaire Hebert.

Blaire Hebert with the LSU Ag Center says that could be exciting news for for the State of Louisiana and their sugar cane crop. ' If our acreage doesn't change and we keep our producers and land we should be number one,' said Hebert. But right now, it's to early to tell if that will be the outcome. If the deal goes through the company will be allowed to farm the land for another six years and a lot can happen in that amount of time. ' We have to be careful where NAFTA is going to be at that time, where the Farm Bill will be, and will domestic sugar coming in to play for the price. Certainly we are optimistic,' said Hebert.

Sale of U.S. Sugar land comes at a price -- 1,700 jobs

06/26/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Ralph De La Cruz- South Florida Sun-Sentinel

When I heard of 's historic plan to buy 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land and turn the area between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades into a true river of grass, I thought, 'What's not to like?' Restoring one-of-a-kind habitat. Improving water quality. All without a tax increase.

Who could possibly have a problem with that?

Try Gloria White. 'A lot of people are going to be out of jobs,' she said, gray eyes flaring at the thought. 'That's not right. There are already a lot of people out of jobs around here.' I stopped into White's convenience store/gas station in South Bay on U. S. 27.

U.S. 27 is Florida's Highway. Drive along it and the soul of the state is revealed. It cuts through bucolic Lake Placid, the suburban congestion of Orlando and Ocala's horse country before ending at the state capital.

In South Florida, Highway 27 is about sugar.

It's a picturesque drive that takes you through the Everglades and along canals, wetlands soon giving way to fields of tender young sugar cane stalks and rock mining pits.

And someday, if the promise of a river of grass is to be believed, it could all be underwater.

South Bay, at the south tip of Lake Okeechobee, someday could be smack dab in the middle of the new grassy river.

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White's store sits at the intersection of U.S. 27 and Palm Beach Road State Road 80. Some 40 miles to the east, State Road 80 becomes Southern Boulevard.

But speaking to White, it's apparent that there's more than a 40-mile separation between the malls of Wellington and Royal Palm Beach and the little convenience store at the intersection of Old and New Florida.

The residents of places like South Bay and Clewiston and Belle Glade and Pahokee see the deluge coming. And it doesn't have much to do with water or grass.

It's about jobs. The 1,700 U.S. Sugar jobs that are supposed to disappear within the next six years. And who knows how many more once the sugar exodus begins. 'I was born in Belle Glade and grew up here,' White said, echoing lines I've heard so many times in so many other places struggling with enormous change. 'My daddy worked the sugar fields. And my sister works for Big Sugar. Businesses have been struggling here.' A friend and customer who's listening to the conversation cautions White that, with a lot of people out of jobs, she might watch her words. 'If you're too scared, you don't have to say what you feel,' White shoots back. 'I'm not afraid to tell the truth.' I'm starting to really like Gloria White.

But, I point out to her and the customer, the buyout may ultimately mean a better environment.

"But hell, what are all these [unemployed] people going to do?" she asks in frustration.

"Hey, the restoration might bring increased tourism," I offer. "Might actually create jobs."

"Yeah, everybody's not going to be out of a job," White concedes.

"But you can bet the ones that will be are the poor folks," said the customer.

If this project is to work, Gov. Crist needs to make sure there's not only money for buying land, but for mending the lives of sugar employees.

That task will be complicated by the fact that many workers are migrants, living in a legal twilight zone. Too unfamiliar with our processes, too scared to solicit help.

I pulled into a Belle Glade store called Bowling Supermarket, where shelves are stocked with Mexican fruit drinks, 6-pound cans of jalapenos and pan dulce, Mexican sweet bread.

The place is empty. So I begin chatting with Giovanni Corado, who sells prepaid phone cards that let people make long-distance calls to places like Mexico and Guatemala. How much of his business is from people employed by sugar companies?

"Practically all of it," said Corado, an immigrant from Guatemala.

So, isn't Corado worried?

He shrugs and smiles.

"If it gets too bad, I'll pack up and leave," he said.

Florida town struggles with news of sugar shutdown

06/26/2008

Chicago Tribune - Online

BRIAN SKOLOFF

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Brian Skoloff - A/P-Chicago Tribune

CLEWISTON, Fla. - Welcome to 'America's Sweetest Town' -- born, built and raised on sugar, a true workingman's community in the sweaty heartland of the Everglades.

The Sugarland Highway slices through the palm tree-lined downtown, past the Cuttin Up Barber Shop, the Common Grounds coffee shop and the American flags flapping atop businesses and light poles.

The annual Sugar Festival draws thousands. Cars sport bumper stickers reading 'Sugar: Just 15 calories a spoonful.' And Sugar Realty offers 'the sweetest deal in town.' But with this week's announcement that Clewiston's dominant employer, U.S. Sugar Corp., will likely go out of business in six years, many residents and workers are pondering life in a company town without a company and wondering how the community will survive.

Nearly 80 years after it formed here during the Great Depression, U.S. Sugar plans to sell some 300 square miles around Clewiston to the state, which wants the land as part of its plan to clean up the Everglades. Agriculture, like sugar and citrus, has long stymied restoration efforts, blocking water flow and adding pollutants from fertilizers to the ecosystem.

The sale of the nation's largest producer of cane sugar means 1,700 workers will be left jobless, not to mention the spinoff effects on Clewiston businesses that depend on them as customers. U.S. Sugar is the heart of Clewiston, literally -- the town is built around the company's two-story red brick headquarters, and the mill is just down the road.

News of the shutdown landed 'somewhere between getting punched in the stomach and food poisoning,' said Greg Thompson, 38, who has been with the company for 20 years and is head of the local sugar union. 'Everyone felt like the breath had been knocked out of them,' Thompson said. It's not all bad news for the workers, though.

Under the \$1.75 billion deal, hourly employees will get a year's pay as severance, while salaried workers will get two years' pay. Since the company is partially employee owned, those who are vested will receive about \$350 per share.

The company declined to provide details on how many shares an average employee owns. Thompson, who also wouldn't reveal details, said employees were starting to count up their shares 'to see if they'd be able to pick up and move somewhere else.' For many who have worked at the mill, on the railroad and in the fields for decades, the news was a stunner. The company kept its negotiations with the state secret. Employees were told about the deal with the rest of the world, through a news conference Tuesday. 'It's really something,' said U.S. Sugar railroad mechanic Tom Owens, 44, as he rubbed his hand firmly across his forehead, smearing the sweaty grit below his ballcap's bill. 'I'm third generation. This community lives on sugar,' Owens said. Ramon Iglesias, 36, manager of Roland Martins Marina and Resort alongside Lake Okeechobee, has lived his whole life in this town of 7,000. 'Clewiston is U.S. Sugar and it always has been,' Iglesias said. In 1931, the town near the bottom center of the state between coasts was a speck on the map, surrounded by rich, black soil, known as muck, that would later become its fortune.

Industrialist Charles Mott transformed the old bankrupt, and much smaller Southern Sugar Co. into U.S. Sugar. The company brought in sugar experts from Louisiana, Cuba and the West Indies, and by 1941, a profitable Florida sugar industry had emerged and the town began to take shape amid the tall, green stalks.

Twenty years later, when Fidel Castro stopped Cuban sugar imports into the U.S., the company began to boom, eventually operating two mills, a 200-mile railroad system and accumulating its land.

The demise of the company, which processes up to 800,000 tons of sugar a year, has

rattled residents and business owners, who rely on sales to mill workers, field hands, mechanics and contractors.

But Clewiston has always been resilient, struggling back repeatedly from despair after drought, depression and a massive 1928 hurricane that killed an estimated 2,500 people in the region.

Many residents hope another industry, possibly a food processor, might come in and take over the high-tech mill. Maybe other large companies will eye the region as a cheap alternative to the high-priced coastal communities.

Or maybe the town's geography will again be its salvation, a big enough draw to establish a tourism-based economy. 'We've got Lake Okeechobee at our back door and the Everglades at our front door,' Mayor Mali Chamness said. 'And when we talk about America's sweetest town, it's not just because of the sugar that's grown here, it's because of the people.' Residents like Iglesias see opportunity amid the despair. 'I think in the long run it's going to be good for Clewiston,' said Iglesias, who makes his living off folks who come to fish in Lake Okeechobee, the second-largest freshwater body in the contiguous United States. 'We're going to bounce back,' Iglesias said, 'and we're going to be stronger than before U.S. Sugar got here.'

Is state's offer to U.S. Sugar bargain or bloated? Answer is not so simple

06/26/2008

Jupiter Courier

JEFF TESTERMAN St. Petersburg Times

Jeff Testerman - Stuart News

Is the state's offer of \$1.75 billion for all of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s land and assets a good price?

Good question.

Most of the price is for U.S. Sugar's land, about 187,000 farm-rich acres in four South Florida counties. But the company's assets include much more.

There is the antebellum-style, red-brick corporate headquarters in Clewiston. A 5.5-acre, state-of-the-art cane sugar refinery. A sugar mill, warehouses, orange groves, packing plants, railroad lines, tractors, office furniture and computers. The state may not want all these accoutrements, but it's a package deal.

'They're acquiring us lock, stock and barrel,' said U.S. Sugar's public relations director, Judy Sanchez. 'It's soup to nuts. That's the only way we'd do the deal.'

In Hendry County, U.S. Sugar's mill, refinery, packing plant and other equipment are valued by the property appraiser at \$617 million. He said he could not provide a value for the company's 63,000 agricultural acres in Hendry.

Next door in Palm Beach County, the property appraiser puts the worth of U.S. Sugar's 100,076 acres at \$395 million. Buildings and equipment add another \$37 million.

In Glades County, the property appraiser said the company has 21,000 acres. In Gilchrist, U.S. Sugar has 80 acres and a citrus tree replacement farm.

The \$1.75 billion price tag agreed upon by the state and U.S. Sugar isn't fixed, and state appraisers will determine the worth of the company before the deal is sealed.

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Allen Zech, manager of the agricultural department for the Palm Beach appraiser, thinks the price is too high, especially because much of U.S. Sugar's property is muck land, inaccessible in the rainy season and not adaptable to many other forms of agriculture.

'If you figure the price is for the acreage, it's \$9,000 or \$10,000 an acre, and I think it should be more like \$3,500 to \$5,000 an acre. I don't know why anyone in their right mind would pay that much,' Zech said.

Jeff Danter, director of Florida's Nature Conservancy office, sees it another way. Danter believes the U.S. Sugar land provides a huge, vital link that could reduce the cost of the multibillion-dollar state and federal effort to restore the Everglades, saving an ecosystem and protecting the water supply for South Florida.

'It could lower the cost of what else is going on there, and provide a benefit for both people and nature,' Danter said. 'In that case, the price could be a real bargain.'

Charlie Crist's McCain Problem

06/27/2008

CNN.com

Thursday, Jun. 26, 2008 By TIM PADGETT/MIAMI

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Tim Padgett - CNN

On the first day of his second annual Florida Summit on Global Climate Change, Governor Charlie Crist was wearing a bright green necktie. It's almost as if he were trying to stifle any doubts about his environmental street cred, though you would think he shouldn't have to worry right now. It's a day after his stunning announcement that Florida would pay some \$1.7 billion to buy out U.S. Sugar, and the company's 187,000 acres of cane fields, to revive the imperiled restoration of one of the nation's eco-treasures, the Everglades. With characteristic ebullience, Crist describes the move like the post-ideological Republican he's become famous for since succeeding the more conservative and partisan Jeb Bush 18 months ago. The U.S. Sugar tract 'is land God created as the natural filter for the Everglades ecosystem,' Crist told TIME. 'This is about getting back to basics and doing the right thing.' At a press conference in the Everglades, Florida governor Charlie Crist announces a \$1.75 billion deal to buy the U.S. Sugar Corp.

But Crist's environmental victory came just as many Floridians and other national political observers had begun to wonder if he was going overboard in a perceived bid to be John McCain's running mate. McCain announced earlier this month that . Crist, who runs a beach-rich state that even Jeb Bush defended against offshore rigs, turned heads when he agreed with McCain. Or he at least said he was 'willing to consider' the idea, as he told TIME on Wednesday, but only 'if it could be proven to me that drilling off Florida's coast would be far enough, safe enough and clean enough' to avoid disastrous oil spills, especially during the region's hurricanes. 'As long as I'm Governor, no Floridian will ever be able to see an oil rig off the coast.' Crist claims that nuance got lost in what he calls 'unfortunate' media efforts to paint him as McCain's parrot. But whether or not he's a serious VP contender - and he insists he's 'not running for it' - Crist is still the of what is arguably the one major swing state McCain absolutely has to win in November. As a result, as he tries to balance his own convictions with a need to assure Florida's large number of independent voters that he and McCain are on the same page, Crist's stances are being scrutinized almost as closely as the Republican nominee's. 'People now see a causal linkage [to McCain] in everything he says,' notes political analyst Susan MacManus of the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Crist insists he's as much his own Guv as he was ever was; 'It's just as easy for me to

speak my mind and my heart as it was a year ago.' Yet for all his refreshing candor, critics say that he has yet to utter the most important words - that he won't accept a vice presidential nod even if McCain were to offer it. The man who has been Governor less than two years now still has too many problems to fix on the peninsula, they argue, including the state's real estate meltdown. On the question of preemptively taking himself out of consideration Crist will only say, 'I don't want to deal with hypotheticals.' In any case, says USF's MacManus, it's actually to Florida's benefit to keep Crist in the veepstakes game because it 'raises not only his stock but the state's.' Still, even environmentalists who sang paeans to Crist on Tuesday when he unveiled the U.S. Sugar deal say they believe presidential politics is driving his openness to drilling. 'For a man who's made himself the Everglades Governor to consider offshore drilling I find more than a little surprising,' says Mark Kraus, vice president of the Everglades Foundation, 'especially when the experts say it would take at least 10 years before it had any effect on gas prices.' Crist supporters cringed on Thursday when California Governor and Crist pal Arnold Schwarzenegger - during his keynote speech at Crist's eco-summit - himself called offshore drilling a phony fix to the oil-price crisis. But Crist argues that industry experts he's talked to posit that increasing U.S. crude output could lower gas prices 'much more rapidly' than the decade or more often cited. What's more, Crist believes that 'just the mere discussion of more domestic oil production' is making a difference. 'Look at the effect it's already having,' he says, 'in the sense that Saudi Arabia is saying they want to produce more barrels a day' to lower prices and curtail any drastic drop in U.S. demand.

If he's so concerned about the energy crisis, critics counter, he should think less about increasing Florida's offshore drilling and more about changing its onshore consumption habits. Perhaps more than even California, Florida is enslaved to the automobile, and its public transportation infrastructure is practically non-existent. To his credit, Crist has at least started the state's first real alternative energy campaign - Florida Power & Light announced this week that it will soon build three solar power plants, including one at the Kennedy Space Center and another that will be the world's largest. And on Wednesday Crist signed a bill (albeit weakened by the GOP-led state legislature) to finally phase in auto and carbon emissions limits in Florida - including the first 'cap and trade' arrangement in the Southeast, whereby companies that exceed their air pollution caps can buy emissions credits from firms that keep pollutants below their caps.

In the meantime, Crist, whose endorsement helped McCain easily win last January's Florida primary, is selling the Arizona Senator to Floridians as 'a man who cares deeply about the environment' despite the drilling flap. Earlier this month, for example, he took McCain on an airboat ride through the Everglades after environmentalists raised the issue of McCain having voted against a federal water bill last year that included \$2 billion for Everglades restoration. (McCain says he objected to other pork provisions in the measure, not the Everglades funding.)

Just as important, in light of the Democrats' portrayal of McCain as a continuation of the unpopular Bush Administration, Crist is working to present the Senator as a truly moderate Republican. Given McCain's history as a straight-talking GOP maverick, that shouldn't be hard. But issues like offshore drilling have slowed his momentum in the Sunshine State - a new Quinnipiac University poll has Obama edging ahead of McCain in Florida for the first time - making it especially crucial that he win over not only the state's independents but potential cross-over Democrats, including still angry Hillary Clinton supporters.

After the pasting the GOP took in 2006, Republican pols like Crist and Schwarzenegger vowed to pull the party 'back to its roots,' says Crist, 'to the moderate, common sense leadership tradition of Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. In Senator McCain we've nominated the best guy to carry that message.' And in Florida, it's a banner whose colors will likely have to be more green than red.

'Hurricane Freddy' drilled water management employees during exercise

06/26/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Palm Beach Post Staff Report

WEST PALM BEACH South Florida Water Management District employees participated in a hurricane drill at the emergency operations center Thursday morning.

The South Florida Water Management District is conducted a full-scale, district-wide exercise designed to demonstrate and evaluate the district's Emergency Operations Center field response and recovery activities in the event of a catastrophic hurricane affecting South Florida.

Trained District staff practiced emergency management and flood-control procedures by responding to 'Hurricane Freddy,' a simulated catastrophic Category 5 hurricane that impacted South Florida.

The exercise will assess the district's ability to respond to numerous hurricane-related incidents and demands on the flood-control system.

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BRIDGE LEVEE O ON LAKE OKEECHOBEE AND F FLOODED

06/26/2008

WPBF News 25 at 11 PM - WPBF-TV

WPBF News 25 at 11 PM - WPBF-TV

HURRICANE FREDDIE HIT SOUTH FLORIDA TODAY. IT IS A SIMULATED STORM THAT PUTS WATER MANAGERS TO THE TEST. Reporter: THIS FICTICIOUS STORM ONLY A TEST BUT PREPARES PEOPLE WHO PROTECT US FROM FLOODS FOR THE REAL THING. FREDDIE IS A S SIMULATED HURRICANE . PREPARES THE DISTRICT'S RESPONSE TEAM FOR A REAL STORM THE FICTICIOUS FREDDIE IS A CATEGORY 5 STORM THAT CHALLENGES RESPONDERS TO CONTAIN A BRIDGE LEVEE O ON LAKE OKEECHOBEE AND F FLOODED CANALS. IT WILL LOOK THE SAME WE MAY NOT HAVE PER, WE MAY NOT HAVE AIR, B YOU WOULD HAVE THE SAME TEAM OF PEOPLE. MORE THAN SEVEN MILLION PEOPLE Reporter: MORE THAN SEVEN MILLION PEOPLE LIVE IN THE 16 1 DISTRICTS . EVEN DURING A DROUGHT THE AREA CAN SUFFER FROM SEVERE FLOODING DURING A HURRICANE. BRIAN ALBERT, WPBF NEWS 25 .

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Simulated Hurricane Hits S. Fla.

06/27/2008

WPBF-TV

Albert, Brian

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Simulated Hurricane Hits S. Fla.
Hurricane Freddy Prepares District

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Hurricane Freddy hit South Florida on Thursday.

It was a simulated storm that put water managers to the test. It prepared the people who protect South Floridians from floods for the real thing.

The annual two-day drill at South Florida Water Management District in West Palm Beach prepared the district's emergency response team for a real storm.

The fictitious Hurricane Freddy was a Category 5 storm that challenged responders to contain a breached levee on Lake Okeechobee and flooded canals.

"It would look the same," Sandra Trunquest of the South Florida Water Management District said. "We may not have power in here. We may not have air. But, basically, you would have the same people."

More than 7 million people live in the 16 counties where the South Florida Water Management District controls water flow.

Thursday's exercise was held as South Florida continued to experience a drought. Even during a drought, the area can suffer from severe flooding during a hurricane.

Bill Gross Algae turning Caloosahatchee into a sewer

06/27/2008
News-Press

News-Press

I have lived in Alva along the Caloosahatchee River for 30 years, and I have never seen our river in such distress. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what is taking place with the river's toxic blue green algae problem that has recently shut down the Olga Water Treatment Plant twice.

This affects over 30,000 customers plus thousands of the people that boat and swim.

Their public health, safety and welfare are at risk.

The Caloosahatchee River has been named one of the top seven most polluted rivers in the nation. This is a designation we should not enjoy.

Agricultural businesses have been given permits by the South Florida Water Management District to draw water for irrigation and to return runoff to the river.

The permits are for a numbers of years. Some businesses never had permits because they were operating before permits were required. These should be reviewed.

The many years of fertilizer nutrients run off by the agricultural businesses have caught up with us.

The nutrients have settled to the bottom of the river and accumulated to the point that temperature and stagnation have caused toxic blue green algae.

The closing of the Franklin Locks and opening only one to two times a day due to the low water in Lake Okeechobee has slowed down the water flow, therefore, not cleaning the oxbows and canals in the river.

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The coastal communities do not want blue green algae, which would pollute the beaches and harm wildlife and river and beach grasses.

Meanwhile, the toxic blue green algae was analyzed by the Cyano Lab that resulted in the shut-down of the Olga Water Treatment plant in March.

The health, safety and welfare of the public is seriously being violated.

The wildlife and plant life is now suffering.

Turtles, fish and manatees are coming up to the surface of the water gasping for oxygen.

Even the egrets and alligators are stained by this toxic blue green algae.

The odor causes headaches and coughing when ingested by swimmers and boaters.

We need more public notices by our Lee County Health Department to warn the public not to swim in the water.

If our beaches on the Gulf have a certain bacteria count, signs have been posted, why not on the river under these dangerous health conditions?

We have good people in the South Florida Water Management District that have personally promised me to help with the toxic blue green algae situation.

I encourage the district to review all permits to discharge runoff into the river by the agricultural businesses.

We also need a reasonable flow of water to end the stagnation creating the toxic blue green algae in our canals, oxbows and the Franklin Locks.

We need a comprehensive plan to bring a safe, healthy river back to life.

The Caloosahatchee River is not to be used as a sewer line.

Let us bring it back to health so everyone can use it for transportation and recreation purposes and of course drinking water.

- Bill Gross is spokesman for Alva Inc., chairman of Survivors of S.R. 80 and a former Lee County School Board member.

'X-treme yard makeover' gets public view before agencies begin documenting its progress

06/27/2008

Naples Daily News

Heithaus, Harriet

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By HARRIET HOWARD HEITHAUS - Naples News

Daphne Volcy's North Naples home has become a test site for the South Florida Water Management District's "X-Treme Yard Makeover" project illustrating the creation of a "Florida-friendly" landscape.

X-treme Yard Makeover

Where: 7050 Trail Boulevard, Naples

Cost: Free

Age limit: All ages

Fat rectangles of sod, snuggled side by side in a verdant quilt, tempt bare toes to try out a footing surprisingly tender for a Florida yard.

Baby-blanket pink pentas, their starry clusters ready to feed some passing butterfly, flank a brick lanai and a bed of several strappy-leaved dracaenas. On the other side, confederate jasmine begins a fragrant climb up a trellis.

To the right, grass and a good-size mulch bed deserving of some fruit trees. To the left, dwarf palms and a deep rose crepe myrtle, hot-pink bougainvillea, blue plumbago and a field of dune sunflowers barely a half-foot into their growth.

The product of the five-week experiment called an "X-treme Yard Makeover," hasn't been extreme at all. But that is just what Daphne Volcy, who volunteered her highly visible front yard for a public Cinderella treatment, wanted. No neon effects and no shrubbery that demands designer haircuts. This is a place she can relax in after work or where she can play games with her 4-year-old grandson over a Saturday morning.

There's also that oh-so-American goal of being yard-proud.

"When people used to ask me where my house was or how to find it, I would tell them, 'just look for the worst yard on the block,'" she said last week, looking at her new patch of parkland. "It's just breathtakingly beautiful."

At the same time, she wanted what the South Florida Water Management District wanted for its first model yard: a neutral ground in the fragile Florida environment. This one was landscaped so it didn't need the kind of fertilizer that seeps into and slowly poisons the Gulf of Mexico. It doesn't crave as much water as other lawns, and grows slowly, a blessing for her mower.

When visitors come tomorrow for the public open house, they'll see the best of what's been developed and tested for Florida in Volcy's nearly 150 square test feet of yard. The turf is Empire Zoysiagrass that grows more slowly and is drought-tolerant because its life-giving stolons grow largely underground and out of the sun.

The yard also holds plants that most people can find at a local garden center or big-box nursery that are drought-tolerant. These aren't necessarily natives, as Mike Malloy, Collier County coordinator for the Florida Yards and Neighborhoods program, points out. They're just hard workers. Those who come to see the model yard Saturday will get not only smoothie samples, fruit kabobs and a stroll on grass good enough to go barefoot in, but also Malloy's bible for a low-water yard, "A Guide to Florida-Friendly Landscaping."

Until this year, Malloy had a lonely job in a county where people have little relationship with their yards. Devastating as it was, last winter's drought and the resulting restrictions of once-a-week irrigation shocked people into seeing the need for landscaping that rolls with the punches, he said.

"People's lawns were dying and they were still seeing that water hasn't come up to the level it should be at. I think our table is still 4 to 6 inches below where it should be," said Malloy. He's a one-time landscaper who has only left a few strips of grass in his own heavily shrubbed and tree-lined yard — and pays water bills as low as \$45 a month.

“People are starting to take grass out of their yard, and we're getting condo complexes calling about ground cover alternatives,” he said. “I can see changes happening in Naples.”

He and his fellow yard evaluators are booked into July with requests from homeowners who want to change their yards. They welcome more, however, and they'll be at Volcy's Saturday morning, ready to listen to visitors, he said.

“We're not just here to do evaluations for the 'Florida Friendly Yard' designations. We get all kinds of requests for all kinds of reasons, but largely people are realizing they also save money when they water less.”

Visitors can expect a cadre of golf shirts in bright colors Saturday, because all the companies that volunteered services or products will be there to explain theirs. There is a Hunter irrigation system that even sticks a technological finger up to the wind when it waters. It checks on soil moisture at various stations before it sends out the first unnecessary drop.

There are local companies like Greenscapes, which offers beyond-the-mower yard care; Forestry Resources, distributors of the Zoysiagrass and manufacturers of locally produced melaleuca mulch; Superior Interlock Paving, which installed Volcy's unusual weed-free, fast-draining lanai; and more.

Still, as Judy Haner, media specialist from the South Florida Water Management District, pointed out, Saturday's event isn't the end. It's just the beginning of tracking the success of the low-demand yard it and the Collier County Extension Service designed.

Staff members will be back out in three months, six months and perhaps at a year to record the changes in the yard and Volcy's feelings about upkeep. The University of South Florida is hoping to make a Spanish language videotape of the experience.

Volcy, a scheduling nurse in her early 60s, says she's ready to learn, including the botanical names for her new plants: “People have asked me about them, and I want to be able to tell them.” Above all, she wants to be able to educate her grandson in living with a responsible landscape.

“When we drove into the driveway after everything had been installed, he didn't even wait for me. He had undone his seat belt and opened the door to run over to the pink flowers. He put his hands so gently on top of them. And then he ran over to the palms and just put his hands under the leaves just brushing them,” she recalled.

It may have been the 4-year-old's rendition of her own reaction when she came home from work Tuesday night to find all the sod and mulch in around her new plants.

“I hadn't expected it, and I was just in awe. I just sat right down there and cried it was so beautiful,” she said.

If you go

What: “X-treme Yard Makeover” including yard tours, Florida-friendly Yard landscaping materials, refreshments and more

Where: 7050 Trail Blvd., North Naples. Free parking and shuttle at Covenant Presbyterian Church, 66926 Trail Blvd.

When: 9 a.m. to noon Saturday

Admission: Free

Information: 263-7615 or www.sfwmd.gov/bcb/

Sponsors: South Florida Water Management District, the Collier County Extension Service, several Florida universities and landscape/garden businesses

Amendment 1 Shaves \$200 From Property Tax Bill

06/27/2008

Highlands Today

Pinnell, Gary

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By Gary Pinnell | Highlands Today

Remember that property tax cut you voted on in January, which added a \$25,000 homestead exemption?

Amendment 1 is taking effect with the tax bill property owners will receive in July, said Highlands County Property Appraiser Raymond McIntyre.

So how much will the average homeowner save?

The real answer is "it depends," said McIntyre, on whether the taxpayer lives in a city or the county, which water management district, the price of the home, whether it's a mobile home, or if it's a commercial business.

Average Home

But assuming those factors don't apply, McIntyre figured a tax bill for a fictional \$200,000 home in Highlands County. The price of the average home is \$192,000, he said.

And that homeowner will save about \$198, he estimated.

Amendment 1 also granted a \$25,000 personal property tax cut to mobile home owners in rental parks for garages, carports, sunrooms and outbuildings. If the mobile home owner lives outside the city limits, he'll save \$389, under the 2007 millages in Highlands County.

There are also real property tax cuts for mobile home owners who own their land, and for businesses.

There are several caveats, McIntyre said. The first is that millages could change.

"We don't know what the county commissioners are going to do," McIntyre pointed out. South Florida Water Management District and Southwest Florida Water Management District and other taxing authorities could also raise their rates, McIntyre said.

Also, taxpayers are suing the state of Florida over Amendment 1. The entire law could be overturned.

Finally, voters will decide on another property tax cut in November, McIntyre said. Amendment 1 capped the commercial property taxes at 10 percent. The November tax cut, if 60 percent of the voters approve, could lower that cap to 5 percent.

It would also eliminate school millages, and replace those school taxes with a 1 cent sales tax. McIntyre had heard that the state estimates schools, statewide, would lose \$3.5 billion in the difference between a one penny sales tax and the current school millages collected in each county.

Next week, the Highlands County tax rolls will be certified to Tallahassee and to local taxing authorities, so they can set their millages and budgets.

"They have until August to report back to us," McIntyre said.

McIntyre will mail out proposed tax bills to property owners in mid-August, he said. That gives taxpayers an opportunity to point out errors and contest their bills. Actual tax bills will be mailed in November.

Gary Pinnell can be reached at 863 386-5828 or gpinnell@highlandstoday.com

Swamp swap: Corkscrew's 'perfect deal'

06/27/2008

News-Press

Lollar, Kevin

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Wildlife main beneficiary of restoration
by kevin lollar • news-press.com •

On one side was Panther Island Mitigation Bank, a series of wetlands rich in diverse native vegetation and wildlife.

On the other was a 640-acre cow pasture full of cattle, low grass and little wildlife.

But the cattle will soon be gone, and the cow pasture will be restored to a more natural wetland state.

Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary has traded 1,280 acres to the South Florida Water Management District for the cow pasture, on the sanctuary's north border, and 480 acres on its southwest border; the sanctuary's two new properties will be restored as a mitigation bank.

"The swap is done," sanctuary director Ed Carlson said. "The land we swapped to the district was surplus land. We didn't need it. The district is putting trails on that land, and we're restoring our new land. It's a perfect deal."

Possibly by the end of the year, the public will have access to 10 miles of trails on the water district's new land.

"This was pretty much an acre-for-acre trade no cash had to change hands," said Phil Flood, director of the district's Lower West Coast Service Center. "Why this is advantageous to us is that the piece we got allows us to complete the trail we're working on. The land we traded was out-holdings: They really weren't contiguous to our holdings."

Southwest Florida Wetlands Joint Venture will do the restoration work on Corkscrew's land the company has already restored the 2,778-acre Panther Island Mitigation Bank, which runs along the sanctuary's western border. Corkscrew will take over and manage Panther Island.

The restoration will be done through mitigation: Under Florida law, if a developer or government agency wants to destroy wetlands, there are four choices, one of which is to buy credits at a mitigation bank degraded wetlands that are restored by someone else.

Restoration includes re-creating wetlands and removing exotic vegetation.

In restoring Panther Island, Southwest Florida Wetlands Joint Venture created a three-tier contour system wetlands of different depths.

"We decided to have three different levels of water," said Bill Barton, chairman of the mitigation bank's management committee. "So, if we have a normal year of rainfall, the center tier will be at levels compatible for bird foraging. If we have excessive rain, the upper levels will be more compatible. In drought years, the lower level will be

compatible. We've created conditions, regardless if we have wet, average or dry conditions, so we'll have some part of the area that's good for the birds.”

In Corkscrew's new 480-acre area, restoration will be mainly removal of exotic vegetation.

At the other site, emphasis will be on creating shallow wetlands, which are typically dry more than half the year.

Shallow, or short-hydroperiod, wetlands are extremely important feeding areas for endangered wood storks. Corkscrew is the largest wood stork nesting colony in North America.

“Storks used to show up in October and hang around in the short-hydroperiod wetlands that's where made their living,” sanctuary resource manager Jason Lauritsen said. “Then, as the wetlands dried down by November and December, they saw concentrations of fish and aquatic vertebrates that encouraged them to nest.

“Now, because we've lost so many of those early foraging areas, they don't nest until January or February. That's an indication that something's wrong with the system.”

Wood storks won't be the only beneficiaries of restored shallow wetlands, which include wet prairies and hydric pine flatwoods.

“These habitats are great cover for insects and fish in their nursery stage,” Lauritsen said. “When you have a lot of light hitting the ground, you often get an algae mat, and the aquatic organisms thrive on that algae mat. It's a very rich primary-production zone that fuels everything that comes later.”

Work on the new Corkscrew property probably won't start for at least a year, Lauritsen said.

When restoration is complete, the former cow pasture will be much as Carlson knew it back in the 1960s.

“Back then, it was the most beautiful property there was,” he said. “It was a beautiful mosaic of habitats. By the late '70s, it was all squash fields. Now, in my lifetime, I'm going to see what was paradise to me restored.”

City Accepts Park Plan

06/26/2008
Caloosa Belle
Brant, Patty

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City accepts park plan

By Patty Brant

Caloosa Belle That night the city accepted the park management plan it charged the park advisory board to complete. Chairman Craig Bartoshuk presented the plan to the commissioners, who will review it and format/ edit it before submitting it to the South Florida Water Man-agement District (SFWMD). The City of LaBelle has leased the site, on the north side of the Caloosahatchee River in Glades County, from SFWMD. Mr. Bartoshuk told the board several of the advisory board members wished to remain in-volved in planning the park, an idea Mayor Puletti welcomed. There are many issues yet to be resolved, including a num-ber of objections by Riverbend Estates residents, whose neigh-borhood is adjacent to the site and whose access road may be used to get to the proposed park.

Much remains unknown, including funding sources, the fate of several sensitive species residents say may be found there and security issues.

According to Mr. Bartoshuk, " The work is just beginning." He also suggested the LaBelle commissioners meet with Glades and Hendry County representatives since they must both be involved in the plans.

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City

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Mr. Bartoshuk asked the board to note the assistance and recommendations of the Division of Forestry in identifying which trees to keep at the site, plan op-tions and burning guidelines.

Mayor Puletti was pleased for the advisory board to continue work on the park, especially the Riverbend Estate members. He added that no infringement on Riverbend was ever intended.

Advisory board member Margaret England reminded the commissioners that they are still on a time line to get the plan to SFWMD by October.

The board unanimously ac-cepted the plan for formatting and editing.

Fire Chief Malcolm Johnson reported that the area is still dry and that he plans to keep burn ban in place for another month.

He said two more firefi ght-ers have been accepted on the department, for a total of 19. He said they are also very pleased with two new brush trucks.

Utility update

Applied Technology Manage-ment's Grant Misterly said work-ers are waiting for a mixer for the new chemical additive system that should help settle coagulants in the water and improve clarity.

In other business:

June 12 the board voted to rescind fuel economy measures voted for in May and will look again at possible measures. It was found those measures were more diffi cult to implement than expected.

Mayor Puletti welcomed Com-missioners Hilda Zimmerly and Dave Lyons back for two more years. With no opposition for their seats, there will be no city election this year.

Officials Say Lake Wildfire Finally 'Dead Out'

06/26/2008

Glades County Democrat

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Officials say Lake wildfire finally 'dead out'

Fires on the lake finally out, after two months

GLADES COUNTY – After burning for nearly two months, wildfire inside Lake Okeechobee is controlled or “dead out,” according to the Florida Division of Forestry.

On Tuesday, the DOF reported the Myakka Cut Wildfire inside Lake Okeechobee was controlled at 38,000 acres.

The wildfire was first reported 2 miles inside the lake on May 2, 2008 at 10:20 a.m.

The fire was controlled on Monday, June 23, 2008 at 10 a.m. The DOF's fixed wing aircraft flew the entire area and reported that there was no visible smoke or activity inside the lake.

The Florida Division of Forestry would like to thank the following agencies for their tireless efforts in actively fighting and continuously monitoring this wildfire: Glades County Fire/Rescue, South Florida Water Management District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Clewiston Fire Rescue, Florida Department of Agriculture, Florida Department of Transportation, Florida Highway Patrol and Glades County Sheriff. Without everyone's collaboration and co-operation this wildfire could have been more of a threat to the communities that border the lake.

The fire proved a pest to the neighboring communities of the lake, filling the early morning skies with thick fog -- which was the largest contributor of a wreck in Clewiston recently.

For additional information contact the local Division of Forestry at 772-260-0053 or visit the DOF Web site at www.fl-dof.com

Environmental Report Gulf Is 'Florida's Toilet'

06/26/2008

WFTV-TV

WFTV-TV

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- What Floridians already are doing to the Gulf of Mexico is 100 times worse than the risk of pollution from offshore drilling, the leader of an environmental group said Thursday.

Linda Young, director of the Clean Water Network of Florida, said poorly treated sewage being flushed into the Gulf is turning it into 'Florida's Toilet.' That's the title of a new report issued by Young's organization. It says the Gulf and associated waters are being fouled in part because sewage treatment facilities have failed to keep up with growth. Weak laws and lax enforcement also share the blame, the report concludes.

It comes amid renewed debate over domestic oil and natural gas exploration after Gov. Charlie Crist dropped his long-standing support for a federal moratorium on offshore drilling.

Crist has endorsed a proposal by Arizona Sen. John McCain, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, to let each state decide whether to drill offshore. 'I'm not pro-drilling,' Young said at a news conference. 'I never have been and never will be, but I'm a lot more concerned and worried about the sewage that we are inadequately treating and irresponsibly disposing all over the state.' The report details violations of environment standards by sewage systems from Pensacola to Key West from 2003 to 2008. It concludes that violations of water quality standards, leaky pipes and accidental spills were the rule rather than the exception.

The excessive nutrients and bacteria have been linked to red tide and other harmful algae blooms, fish kills and contaminated beaches and seafood. 'You don't poop where you eat, and that's what we're doing,' said Jack Rudloe, director of the Gulf

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Specimen Marine Laboratory, who joined Young at the news conference.

The report recommends tougher enforcement and stronger laws, advanced treatment of all sewage, and more money for wastewater treatment. It also calls for bans on discharges into surface waters and on new connections to out-of-compliance systems and growth limits in areas without adequate sewage facilities.

It criticizes the Department of Environmental Protection for inconsistent and ineffective enforcement, citing a recent report by another group, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The PEER report shows about two-thirds of domestic wastewater cases last year were settled by the payment of fines without monitoring or other follow-up or lawsuits. The average penalty also dropped by about 60 percent. 'It's what we call a traffic ticket mentality or pay to pollute,' said PEER's Florida director Jerry Phillips.

He said that trend has accelerated although the agency promised to get tougher after Crist took office last year.

Department spokeswoman Dee Ann Miller said in an e-mail that '99.99 percent' of all domestic wastewater in the state -- 1.7 billion gallons a day -- is handled without incident. 'DEP stands by its enforcement record,' she wrote. 'While wastewater spills are abnormal events that sometimes happen, DEP takes all wastewater spills seriously and follows up with any necessary enforcement action.' The department is working with utilities to eliminate direct discharges into surface waters and encouraging the reuse of treated wastewater for such purposes as irrigation, she added.

Boat maintenance center in Indiantown will be Martin's largest working waterfront when finished

06/26/2008

Jupiter Courier
R.J. Harrington

R.J. Harrington - Stuart News

INDIANTOWN Work is under way on what will be the largest working waterfront in Martin County, scheduled to be completed next year.

Called the Indiantown Marine Industries Center, the 38-acre site is on the St. Lucie Waterway, on Citrus Boulevard near the Indiantown Airport.

The center, which could create hundreds of jobs and will be complete in ninth months to a year, will build, maintain and refurbish boats. It will be primarily a manufacturing location, although there might be boat storage as well.

It will be a real plus for Indiantown, creating jobs and putting us on the map as the spot to go for marine industries, said David Powers, who with his brother Kevin owns Indiantown Realty, which represents the owner-developer Joe Walsh.

The facility will be on the St. Lucie Canal, about halfway between the St. Lucie and Lake Okeechobee locks.

Powers said the squeeze placed on boat building and repair operations by condo developments in Miami and Fort Lauderdale could help steer business to Martin County.

We will certainly get some of that business, he said.

He said pieces of larger boats could be shipped by barge from Atlantic or Gulf Coast

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ports, built in Indiantown and then shipped back to a main facility for final assembly.

Mr. Walshs decision to invest and market this site is a very positive step forward for Indiantown and Martin Countys efforts to grow the marine business sector, said Ron Bunch, executive director of the countys Business Development Board.

Having a location of this magnitude, on the only cross-state canal and one that is tailored to marine uses makes our area even more attractive for companies considering a location for their expanding operations.

The project will include widening the canal in that area by about 50 feet from the existing bank to the property. The site already has a 300-ton lift that will accommodate boats up to 165 feet in length.

The facility has cleared Martin Countys review process, David Powers said. No estimate of total cost was available at this time, Powers said.

The marine industry contributes more than \$18 billion per year to the states economy, said Mike Kiefer, president of the Marine Industries Association of Florida. We are excited this facility is opening, and that it will offer boat builders, marine contractors and others in the marine industry a place to relocate or expand their operations in Florida.

Celine Dion Hits Back Over Water Usage

06/26/2008

Starpulse

Starpulse

Canadian singer Celine Dion has hit back after she was named and shamed by water authorities in Florida - insisting her massive water usage was down to a burst pipe. The singer was criticized for using up over 6.5 million gallons at her Miami home, with officials claiming Dion used more water than any other resident in the U.S.

But now Dion's representatives have insisted that the excessive \$36,343.13 bill was caused by a burst water main underneath the property.

The pipe was reportedly damaged in May 2007 when the previous home on the site was demolished to make way for Dion's luxurious Jupiter Island complex.

But the star only realized something was amiss when she was landed with massive costs from her local utility provider.

Dion's lawyer Michael Weeks says, 'Except for a few new trees that need heavy watering, barely any landscaping was done during that time. Something went wrong. Once the underground pipe was located and repaired, water usage subsided back to normal levels. By January 2008, the property was using an amount of water that I would expect to be one of the lowest on Jupiter Island.' - -Celine Pictures (This news article provided by World Entertainment News Network)

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Marco residents say dewatering drying pond affecting habit

06/27/2008

Naples Daily News

Farrell, Kelly

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Residents surrounding a lake near Balmoral and Granada are concerned they will lose fish and wildlife as the water level continues to lower

By KELLY FARRELL -Naples Daily News

Residents in the Sheffield Sewer district are concerned about a large pond near their homes that is being drained of its water.

The man-made pond near the corner of Balmoral and Granada abuts three lot lines, and sits on property owned by Kenneth Metcalf – that is for sale.

Nearby residents reported that the large pond appears to be draining quickly ever since the dewatering for the sewer project began in the district about 10 days ago.

City officials said the dewatering process is only part of the reason for the shrinking water level. City environmental specialist Nancy Richie said it may also be due to a long dry season contributing to the lower water level.

“I’ve lived here 15 years with droughts and hurricanes, I’ve never, ever, ever seen the pond this low,” said Jeanne Siverson, a resident of Granada.

Residents are reporting concerns for the wildlife due to a possible change in salinity in addition to a four-foot drop in the pond’s water level.

Siverson said she was somewhat disappointed by the lack of a quick response from her first inquiries to city staff.

“They’re probably going to say it’s because I was against the sewers that my concerns don’t hold any water,” Siverson said.

However she said a subsequent e-mail to City Manager Steve Thompson was addressed quickly and Richie took action almost immediately.

Richie and another environmentalist have been measuring the pond’s level almost every day over the last week.

Siverson said she is still left wondering what can really be done.

“It’s not like they can stop the project ... I feel like they’re just crossing their fingers. No one really knows what’s going to happen and by the time they do, I’m afraid it will be too late,” she said.

Siverson reported a decrease in visiting birds and three tarpon whose fins can be seen now because the water is so shallow.

“Every day a big blue heron, nearly as tall as I am, came to the pond for a meal. I haven’t seen him since the dewatering began. It’s probably just all the noise,” Siverson said, adding “I’m afraid we’ll have a fish kill. We’ve caught, fed and grown these fish, especially the three-foot long Tarpon.”

Residents say the pond is home not only to blue herons and tarpon but also to snook, tilapia, cichlids, grouper, turtles, blue crab, oscar, mullet and a small alligator. Most of the fish have been stocked by the residents over the last 16 years since the pond was dug. Other fish may have come through a tidal flow from Barfield Bay.

The residents in the neighborhood, which was once marked by a sign which read "The Sanctuary," say they take pride in the area's old Florida style and would like to preserve it.

In addition to fish and other aquatic life, Siverson said she observed a wide variety of birds including Ibis, egret, anhinga, cormorant, wood storks, and roseate Spoonbills.

Richie said she has talked to the residents in the Sheffield sewer district neighborhood about this and other environmental concerns.

"I have a good relationship with them due to prior work with gopher tortoise monitoring ... Really nice folks over there and I'm trying to address their concerns," Richie said.

Project manager James Miller of the Public Works Department also said the city is changing the pace of the dewatering in the area to minimize the effects on the pond.

In an e-mail response to Siverson, Miller wrote: "we also noticed the changing water level and are currently trying to gauge the rate of change at this time."

He added that they are pumping out the minimum amount necessary to do the construction work on Balmoral and will do the same as the dewatering continues around the corner on Granada.

Unfortunately for the residents, the longer the dewatering takes the more expensive the dewatering process for their area will be.

The water level "has only varied a couple inches up and down depending on tides, and rain," Miller wrote in an e-mail to the Eagle.

"The sewer project has no intent to impact the water level of the pond ... Over time the dewatering will reach equilibrium with the aquifer," he added

Since the pond is privately owned, city monitoring of the water level did not begin until after the dewatering process started and salinity levels were not tested in advance to detect if there were changes in the brackish water.

Richie said that since Granada was built, the mangroves have been dying on the side of the street opposite the pond, signaling that the tidal flow to the pond from Barfield Bay may be minimal.

"Tidal influence to the pond remains intact, and should only be interrupted for a brief time when sewer is constructed beneath the tidal drain connection on Granada," Miller said.

Richie said she agreed with Miller that once the dewatering is finished and the sewer is installed the water levels should return to normal.

Iguanas to become reptiles of concern?

06/26/2008

Boca Raton News

Johnston, John

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Nanci Anderson is serious. She concerned about what has become the scourge of Boca Raton for many the fleet footed iguana.

District 4 County Commissioner Mary McCarty agrees.

And has in fact requested a resolution from fellow commissioners encouraging the Florida Fish and Wildlife (FWF) commission to include iguanas in a recently passed statewide ordinance as 'reptiles of concern.

Before you reach for the phone this isnt a request by McCarty for warm and cuddly iguana treatment, or an entitlement program on behalf of the reptiles.

In fact, adding iguanas to the reptiles of concern law actually is the best recent hope for communities that want to at least slow down the rise of the garden eating, and marina befouling lizards.

Thats because those who buy reptiles named on the concern list, must also buy a \$100 license, and also have the iguana microchipped the latter aimed at preventing the indiscriminate dropping of iguanas into the wild only to find them in your backyard, or deep diving in your pool, in a few days.

McCarty received the request for adding iguanas to the list from Nanci Anderson, President of Animal Rights Foundation of Florida,

who said in a letter to McCarty:

Currently, iguanas can be purchased for as little as \$10 at pet stores. Adding iguanas to the list of reptiles of concern would make it more complicated and expensive to purchase these animals, and would discourage impulse purchases.

Growing Concern

In April 2006, Boca Ratons Marine Advisory Board asked the City Council to come up with an iguana eradication program to stem the growing population of the big, green, spiky lizards.

The advisory board has done its own interviews with pest control companies but nothing official has happened.

The Boca Marine Advisory Board is not alone in its concerns

The board of the South Florida Water Management District has asked federal regulators to take a step toward banning imports of large snakes. Scientists have noted the python explosion for years; calls for bans have also come from some state legislators,

In May 2006, Commissioner McCarty said the county should ban the sale of both large snakes and iguanas something Bocas Council and Marine Advisory board supports.

To discourage large snakes from simply being abandoned, others have suggested that large reptile owners should pay a \$100 permit fee to own such creatures a plan subsequently adopted in the reptiles of concern law passed earlier this year, along with requiring microchipping.

No Choice

McCarty herself told the Boca Raton News that its not about wanting to control commerce.

It has to do with species that are hard to keep once they become adult and full grown. Owners have no choice really but to get rid of them.

That's not news to Boca residents; in particular those who live near or use the city's marina areas.

Both in the city, and other areas of Palm Beach County, iguanas that can reach six feet in length are multiplying rapidly. Native to Central and South America, the voracious, fleet-footed iguana has no natural enemies in the suburbs of South Florida.

Some may have originally arrived as stowaways on freighters arriving at South Florida ports. But pet owners and dealers -- shocked at how huge the reptiles had grown -- probably released most, McCarty said.

The easy way is to just release them outdoors.

Statewide Ban?

McCarty has in the past suggested a countywide sales ban against large snakes and lizards.

Commissioner Burt Aaronson, however, pointed that a Palm Beach County ban wouldn't prevent residents from going to either Broward or Martin Counties to buy snakes or lizards. Therefore, he reasoned, not only would a county ban put pet store owners at a competitive disadvantage, it wouldn't solve the problem.

Aaronson said that the only way to deal with it would be a statewide ban. Various measures to create such bans have been proposed in the past, but have never gotten out of conference committees.

McCarty pointed out that, and in many cases like the iguana, Florida doesn't have cold weather to force the animals to move south, or kill off the non-native and threatening plants. Iguanas can't in fact live on any long-term basis where the temperature is consistently much below 60 degrees.

Something must be done, McCarty said. It is having a very bad effect on the balance of nature here in our state and changing and destroying natural native habitat in Florida, especially in the Everglades.

A microchip and \$100 is a step in that direction.

