

SFW

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Interest could double cost of Everglades land deal

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06/27/2008

Forbes - Online

A/P

A planned \$1.75 billion deal to buy out U.S. Sugar Corp.'s land in the Everglades could end up costing Florida twice that much, including interest payments, officials said Friday.

Earlier this week, Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar Corp., the nation's largest producer of cane sugar, announced a tentative deal for the state to acquire the company's nearly 300 square miles in the Everglades.

The state wants the land for Everglades restoration efforts.

However, the eventual cost to the state, based on a 5.5 percent interest rate during the proposed 30-year financing plan, would be \$3.5 billion. That's excluding any money the state will have to spend preparing the land for restoration purposes.

The district plans to pay for the land, in part, through the issuance of bonds. 'The amount we'll be paying U.S. Sugar remains the same,' Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, said Friday. 'If we had the money, we'd write a check tomorrow, but we don't,' she added. 'The only way we can afford this acquisition is if we borrow the money ... It's like a 30-year mortgage.' The agency hopes to recoup some money through refinancing over the course of the deal, and by selling off some of U.S. Sugar's assets it won't need, such as the company's sugar mill and citrus plant.

Negotiations on the deal are still ongoing. Officials hope to have final agreement by November.

Political pluck, power dovetailed in state-U.S. Sugar deal

06/28/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Singer, Stacey

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Stacey Singer - Palm Beach Post

Standing on his skiff, hedge fund billionaire Paul Tudor Jones II grew more confident with each cast into the salty shallows of Florida Bay - snook or no snook.

His goal was more ambitious than catching a few fish. He hoped to persuade Florida's newly elected governor, Charlie Crist, to loosen Big Sugar's grip on the agency charged with restoring Florida's Everglades, the South Florida Water Management District.

Success would be like catching a 16-pound bonefish, something huge, and maddeningly elusive under Gov. Jeb Bush. It would mean real progress toward Everglades restoration. Progress toward a clean and healthy Florida Bay.

For more than 30 years, the environmental aristocrats who bankrolled state advocacy groups have sounded the same theme: Return farmland to wetlands, so that water can flow like a sheet from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, and finally into Florida Bay, the way nature intended.

Yet farm interests stood in the way, and in Florida government, they have remained as fixed as the horizon. In nearly 10 years, the plan to restore the Everglades had never broached a Big-Sugar buyout. All the more reason that jaws dropped when Crist last week stood side-by-side with the U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Buker, announcing the largest conservation land deal in the history of Florida, a \$1.75 billion plan to buy the 80-year-old company's assets. How that moment came to be has been a mystery to many, from sugar industry watchers to political insiders. Crist has long had an interest in the Everglades and has assembled a staff with similar interests. But the large and complex deal also bears the imprint of Jones, a top Wall Street expert in commodities markets and a passionate conservationist who owns a vacation home in Islamorada.

Jones, traveling in Africa, did not respond to e-mailed questions about his role. But his colleagues and advisers to Crist acknowledge a relationship has developed between the two, one so close that Jones reportedly knew of Sugar's openness to sell its assets in November, several months before the executive director of the South Florida Water Management District or even Florida Secretary of Environmental Protection Mike Sole. Crist's chief of staff, Eric Eikenberg, acknowledged the fishing trips and phone calls Crist and Jones have shared. 'There is a relationship there that has been formed out of respect,' said Eikenberg. 'They've had multiple conversations since the governor took office.' Crist is a Republican, and Jones is a top fund-raiser for Barack Obama, a Democrat. Still, the longtime politician and the liberal billionaire have much in common. Both found their environmental epiphany at the end of a fishing pole. Fish don't like dirty water. 'You shine a light on him and he runs away,' Buker said then. The sugar tax try failed.

Tide turns for industry

In the intervening years, both Crist and Jones grew more powerful. Jones ascended from commodities trader to Wall Street wizard, becoming one of the wealthiest men in the world according to Forbes, zipping in and out of about 30 commodities markets and assembling companies, one of which manages an estimated \$20 billion in assets. Colleagues say he hasn't traded in sugar in 15 years, and they insist he does not have

any financial interest in the debt the state plans to issue for the purchase.

The 53-year-old father of four has been as devoted to his family, his recreation and his philanthropies as he is his hedge funds. Married to Australian model Sonja, Jones founded New York's poverty-fighting Robin Hood Foundation, and he helped found Miami's Everglades Foundation, devoted to restoring the environment.

Jones, who was born in Memphis, is an avid hunter and fisherman.

In Greenwich, Conn., he's known for decorating his waterfront mansion at Christmastime in such an elaborate manner that he must hire off-duty police to manage the traffic.

Crist, meanwhile, skipped like a stone from law-and-order legislator to attorney general to green governor, thanks in part, to the half-million worth of Jones' checks to the state Republican Party. Sugar's star had not risen so high. By last summer, the sugar industry found itself facing unprecedented challenges. Free trade pressures in Washington threatened its long-protected federal subsidies. The black-gold muck that nourished its cane would not last forever, but there was a backup plan to build hundreds of thousands of homes in Palm Beach County's Everglades Agricultural Area. The real estate downturn threatened that plan.

Meanwhile, the company was fighting a bitter and costly lawsuit from its employee-shareholders. They had learned that the company's board, dominated by descendants of Charles Stewart Mott, had nixed an offer that would have given them nearly \$100 a share more than U.S. Sugar told them their shares were worth.

Amid this, a drought and a newly environmentally sensitive water district board was, U.S. Sugar felt, threatening the dependability of its water supply.

Two months after his Florida Bay fishing trip with Jones, Crist had made two key appointments to the water district board: Miami attorney Eric Buermann was a former general counsel to the Bush-Cheney campaign, but he also carried pro-environment credentials such as a membership in the Theodore Roosevelt Society. Shannon Estenoz, a civil engineer, was a leading Everglades advocate.

Environmental leaders were thrilled with Estenoz and cautiously optimistic about Buermann. The sugar industry was less pleased, particularly with Estenoz.

Buermann became chairman of the governing board, with Estenoz as vice chair.

And things changed. There was a time when the water district could be counted on to allow farmers to recycle their polluted runoff into Lake Okeechobee when necessary. But when the historically low lake levels struck last summer, Crist's appointees led the charge in voting against such backpumping. It made no sense to allow pollution of the waterways when they were spending billions to restore and clean them, they said. 'It was the first time they had lost in the 20 years I've been around,' said Tallahassee lawyer and environmental advocate Thom Rumberger. 'They got slapped in the face.' U.S. Sugar's Robert Coker asked Crist for a meeting. In November, Coker sent two lobbyists, Brian Ballard and Mac Stipanovich, to 'help him better understand our perspective,' Coker said, to see that he was 'sensitive to our need for sustainability.' They discussed backpumping, lake levels, court-ordered pollution controls. Crist ended the meeting by shocking the lobbyists. 'What the governor said was, 'There are a lot of complex matters. Maybe what we ought to do is just buy U.S. Sugar out,' ' Coker said. Ballard and Stipanovich took the proposal back to Coker. 'I was very stunned. That was not the expectation we had for that meeting. What we hoped to get out of that meeting was a commitment to work on issues in a cooperative way,' he said. And yet when the proposals went back to U.S. Sugar's board, it was not rejected. 'When you own something and build something for 80 years, you develop an emotional attachment to the business and to the land. The descendants of Charles Stewart Mott, who make up the majority of our board, have had offers in the past for all or parts of our company and our land. They never felt it met their criteria,' he said.

But Crist's offer had their attention. 'We believe that our company and our board and our shareholders have gotten two things. We've gotten reasonable fair value - not what we thought we could have gotten,' Coker said. 'And at the same time, they know these lands are going to be used to ensure the future of the Florida Everglades. I think that's a legacy they were comfortable with.' At Crist's announcement, a day on which God, Teddy Roosevelt and the Louisiana Purchase were invoked, Coker found himself shaking hands with George Barley's widow, Mary, co-founder with Jones of the Everglades Foundation.

It was a strange moment. Coker and Barley had been bitter political opponents for decades.

Coker said Crist brought fresh faces to the issue. Diana Sawaya-Crane had worked for Crist when he was attorney general. He made her a cabinet aide and designated her an environmental adviser. Eikenberg, a former aide to former U.S. Rep. E. Clay Shaw, had worked on Everglades funding in Washington.

Looking for the big 'wow' Meanwhile, Michael Sole, Crist's new environmental protection secretary, had regulated pollution and other matters in 17 years with the agency. Sole had experience organizing state deals to buy and preserve large tracts of land, including the Babcock Ranch Preserve.

In February, Crist asked all of them to work on assessing the feasibility and desirability of acquiring U.S. Sugar's land. 'Every day, the concept became more and more, 'Not only is this viable, but, wow, this is the right thing to do for Everglades restoration,' ' Sole said. A year earlier, Sole and Eikenberg had sat in a briefing on Everglades restoration, looking at a map with more than 200 small and complex projects needed to store dirty farm water and runoff, clean it, and enable it to flow when needed into the Everglades.

Looking at the map, Eikenberg said he could only shake his head at the complexity and expense. Water district Executive Director Carol Wehle recalls how Eikenberg ended that initial meeting. 'He said, 'This is messy and it's complicated, and it's a lot of little projects. Isn't there some big wow that would move a lot of this forward?' ' Wehle recalled. Buying U.S. Sugar didn't even enter her mind. It was never on the table. Eikenberg and Sole said they didn't raise the possibility, either. 'It never would have occurred to me to say, 'Hey, what if we bought out U.S. Sugar,' ' Wehle said. That the day had come was as amazing to Wehle as it was to Eikenberg, Sole and even U.S. Sugar's Buker, who had fought the environmentalists so hard, for so long.

Asked what had transpired in 10 years of Everglades restoration to make U.S. Sugar suddenly receptive to selling its assets, Buker, put it simply: 'What changed in 10 years ago from now is the people have changed.' Vote for this story!

A whole bunch of questions'

06/28/2008

Florida Keys Keynoter

Kevin Wadlow Senior Staff Writer

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By Kevin Wadlow - Keys Keynoter

Sugarcane fields stretch to the horizon in this photo taken over Hendry County, near Clewiston.

Photos courtesy SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT A long road ahead until \$1.7B deal is complete

A plan to convert nearly 300 square miles of sugarcane land to Everglades restoration ranks as the best thing that could happen to Florida Bay, no doubt about it, Everglades Foundation founder Mary Barley says. Gov. Charlie Crist made the bombshell announcement Tuesday that U.S. Sugar agreed to sell all of its Everglades Agricultural Area holdings to the state for about \$1.7 billion. We've been asking for more land in the agricultural area since the beginning, said Barley, an Islamorada resident named as a Time magazine Environmental Hero for her work to restore the Everglades and Florida Bay. This should bring clean freshwater in the right quantities to Florida Bay, Barley said. We might actually get a benefit this time. The deal won't be sealed until November, and U.S. Sugar will be allowed to wind down its operations over the next six years. The South Florida Water Management District has been charged with overseeing the acquisition - and finding the money to pay for it.

Sugarcane fields such as this will come under state control under a deal worked this week with U.S. Sugar. But it will be years perhaps decades before it's all final. Photos courtesy SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT Mike Collins, an Islamorada fishing guide who has served on the district board since 1999, said it won't be easy. Hopefully it will all work out and be hunky-dory, Collins said. But we don't have a real good history of things being hunky-dory. Collins said the complex transaction, which would include swapping some land outside the restoration area for properties not owned by U.S. Sugar, will require extensive changes in Everglades restoration plans. This will take most of the Everglades-restoration money we have, Collins said. I have a whole bunch of questions on how this is going to work. Collins said he pushed for the 1992 purchase of the Frog Pond property in South Florida as a key step in improving water flow to Florida Bay. We finally got a project design for the Frog Pond that works - 16 years later, Collins said. That has been a lessons-learned thing for me. District board Vice Chairwoman Shannon Estenoz, a Keys native, said reaction from the environmental community has been almost unanimously euphoric. Everybody is very happy, Estenoz said. I'm very optimistic we'll get the deal done, and it will be a great deal for the Everglades and ultimately for the people of South Florida. Estenoz said, It's prudent to stay well-grounded in reality, and we need to be fully aware of the challenges before us. But there's nothing wrong in saying this is one of the biggest things that's ever happened to protect the Everglades. Even Barley acknowledged, This isn't going to happen tomorrow. However, the comprehensive Everglades restoration work planned by the federal and state governments is running over budget and well behind schedule, she said. I can run the numbers in my head and this is a bargain, Barley said. This is going to save us money in the long run. A large portion of the land near Lake Okeechobee likely can be converted to a large reservoir system to store and filter water flowing south from Central Florida. A complex series of underground storage facilities envisioned as a main element of the original plan figured to be more expensive and troublesome than expected, Barley said. We're spending less than \$2 billion instead of \$100 billion, and the science is better, she said. She credited Crist for making the staggering proposal to U.S. Sugar. Charlie has been with us on a lot of Everglades issues, Barley said. He wasn't afraid to go out and ask. The Water Management District board convenes Monday for its first joint look at the proposal. We have to do a lot of due diligence, Collins said. It's not just drawing a reservoir on map. We're obligated by law to look at a lot of technical and financial issues.

Gov. Crist Pact With U.S. Sugar 'A Gift To The Everglades'

06/28/2008

Town-Crier Newspapers, The

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Carol Porter-Wellington Town-Crier

Robert Buker Jr. of U.S. Sugar signs the statement of principles while Gov. Crist and Shannon Estenoz of the South Florida Water Management District look on. Carol Porter 27.JUN.08

Gov. Charlie Crist gathered with officials from the State of Florida, the United States Sugar Corp. and environmental activists Tuesday at the edge of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge for the official announcement that the state will purchase a vast expanse of land south of Lake Okeechobee from the sugar producer.

The state will pay U.S. Sugar about \$1.75 billion for 187,000 acres of agricultural land that will play a key role in restoring the natural flow of water from the lake to the Everglades. "I can envision no better gift to the Everglades, to the people of Florida and to the people of America as well as our planet than to place in public ownership this missing link that represents the key to true restoration," Crist said. "Thanks to U. S. Sugar, we have a strategy to acquire almost 187,000 acres of land. That's almost 300 square miles. I've asked them to work with state and federal agencies, and of course, the public at large so we can all take part in this monumental undertaking." The South Florida Water Management District will negotiate the final sale of the land with U.S. Sugar over the next few months and take possession of the area and the company's facilities in six years.

U.S. Sugar President and CEO Robert Buker Jr. admitted to mixed feelings about the deal, which would eventually spell the demise of U.S. Sugar operations. Still, he expressed pride in taking part in a "watershed event in national conservation history" and "a paradigm shift for the Everglades." "I am sobered and a little more saddened by the prospect and transition that lies before us," Buker said. "The transition sees new beginnings and the end of a company I took over six years ago. On the other hand, I am excited by what we are doing today and what it means for the future of Florida's environment. For three decades, four good governors have struggled with complex environmental problems. The results of the struggles were a series of partial fixes. Sometimes they were effective, but invariably, they were expensive. Governor Crist had the vision to look a little more deeply than the prior four governors and to see this problem needing a more fundamental and systemic solution and more importantly than that vision, he had the courage to act on it." SFWMD Governing Board Vice Chair Shannon Estenoz called the occasion a landmark moment. "The restoration value we are buying is priceless," she said. "Today, we are offering Everglades restoration opportunities we never thought possible. We offer the Everglades progress once thought unachievable and protection once thought unattainable. History will mark today as a watershed event in restoring our beloved national treasure, the Everglades. Generations will thank you, Gov. Crist, for making this happen. Thank you, Governor Crist and U.S. Sugar, for partnering together to make Everglades history." State Sen. Jeff Atwater (R-North Palm Beach) expressed excitement at the prospect of the true restoration of a natural system on an almost incomprehensible scale. "This flow of water south will nourish the Everglades rather than have it artificially pumped to places where it was never meant to be," he said. "We will allow it to be treated and moved to where it has been for hundreds of thousands of years. That is significant. It is very exciting that we would allow this and to allow nature to return to its place." County commissioners Jess Santamaria and Karen Marcus were optimistic about the day's events, although both said they were taken by surprise, having found out what was going to happen only the day before. "I think it's great,"

Marcus said. "It can be worked out to everyone's benefit." Everglades Foundation CEO Kirk Fordham noted that after more than 15 years of public advocacy and frequent policy battles with the sugar industry, longtime adversaries are united behind a common purpose. "This is truly a historic moment in the life of the Everglades, when bitter adversaries united to support an unprecedented and unexpected good," Fordham said. "Unthinkable progress is now possible, and in our lifetimes. This is a moment for the record books, a priceless gift to the generations to follow us." John Marshall of the Marshall Foundation said the deal would mark the realization of a goal long sought by pioneering environmentalists, making possible a truly comprehensive Everglades restoration project. "There are a lot more details to be worked out, but this deal jumpstarts the possibility of restoring the river of grass in its true form, albeit down to a more narrow river," he said. Glades resident and family farmer Ardis Hammock, however, admitted she was devastated when she heard the news, as U.S. Sugar has always been the exclusive buyer of her farm's crop. "Our family farm has never sold to anyone else," Hammock said. "Hopefully friends will continue to take care of friends. U.S. Sugar has always been a friend to us. We are all in this together. It's about continuing to be in this together."

Everglades of past now out of reach?

06/28/2008

St. Petersburg Times - Online

Craig Pittman

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Craig Pittman-St. Petersburg Times

Four months ago, a pair of Gov. Charlie Crist's aides met with Earthjustice attorney David Guest to talk to him about his successful lawsuit against U.S. Sugar Corp. for polluting Lake Okeechobee. They swore him to secrecy, and then one of the aides unfurled a map and told Guest that U.S. Sugar was negotiating with the state for a total buyout.

'I nearly wet my pants,' Guest said.

His second reaction: This is a chance to put everything in the Everglades back the way it was, to convert 187,000 acres of sugarcane and refineries back into marshes full of saw grass, pond apple forests, cypress stands a true revival of the River of Grass.

But that's not going to happen, say the state and federal officials in charge of the \$11-billion Everglades restoration project. The patient is too far gone to take it off life support.

'It sounds lovely to think we could turn it back to the way it was,' said Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency that would actually buy the land. 'But the reality is it's going to be a very constructed, very managed system.'

Crist's announcement Tuesday created huge expectations about turning the U.S. Sugar land into what he called 'the missing link' in the Everglades restoration project. But as hoopla dies down and the hard work begins on ironing out the details, people are starting to wonder exactly what the state will get if it goes through with the buyout.

Not everybody is happy with what has been revealed so far. Dexter Lehtinen, attorney for the Miccosukkee Tribe of Indians, which lives in the Everglades, is questioning whether the whole thing is 'nothing but a publicity stunt.'

Lehtinen and the Miccosukees don't like the possibility that buying U.S. Sugar's land will siphon away all the money the water district intended to spend on other

Everglades restoration projects.

Historically, water flowed south through the bends and curves of the Kissimmee River into Lake Okeechobee. When heavy rains filled the lake, the water would spill over the edge into the River of Grass flowing slowly southward to Florida Bay.

The Army Corps of Engineers, in the name of flood control, straightened the Kissimmee and built a dike around the lake, cutting off the flow to the Everglades. Now Everglades National Park starves for water.

Meanwhile, the sugar companies south of the lake routinely backpumped fertilizer-laden water off their fields into the lake, contributing to a pollution load so heavy that not long ago one federal official called it 'a chocolate mess.' Friends of the Everglades, the Florida Wildlife Federation, Earthjustice and other environmental groups successfully sued to halt that practice, prompting U.S. Sugar to consider a buyout when Crist proposed it.

When the lake gets too full, the corps and the water district flush the excess out through the Caloosahatchee River and the St. Lucie River, sending a rush of pollution into delicate estuaries on both coasts, creating toxic algae blooms and killing fish.

Crist said this week that he got an earful about that continuing problem while he was campaigning for governor in 2006. He's hopeful that acquiring U.S. Sugar's land south of the lake will give the corps and the water district a way to drain the lake southward, the way it used to.

In the mid 1990s, the corps examined the idea of creating a 'flow way' south of the lake and rejected it for the same three reasons Wehle now says it won't work:

The lake is too polluted with phosphorous, so pouring its water into the Everglades would damage what's left.

The land is polluted, too. Seventy years of fertilizing the cane fields has left the ground as packed with phosphorous as the lake. The Everglades is supposed to be a low-phosphorous ecosystem.

'Every time you put water on farmed land that's had an excess of phosphorous on it, you get cattails,' said Herb Zebuth, a retired state Department of Environmental Protection expert on the lake. 'That's not the Everglades. The Everglades is saw grass.'

As the farmers drained it, a lot of the muck dried up and blew away. The farmland is now 20 feet below what it once was, Wehle said, ruining the gentle slope that once made the River of Grass run.

'If you flowed water into that land, it would just sit there,' she said.

So instead of tearing down one wall of the dike around the lake and letting the water flow freely southward, Wehle and corps officials say they expect to build large water treatment areas artificial wetlands that can clean the pollution as well as big reservoirs to hold the water for use when it's needed by Everglades National Park.

'Think of this as a facility to restore Everglades National Park and Florida Bay,' Wehle said. 'It will facilitate their restoration.'

There are other potential problems, too pesticides, for instance. When the state re-flooded farm fields around Central Florida's Lake Apopka as part of a restoration project in 1998, more than 600 birds wound up poisoned. They were killed by pesticide residue that contaminated the site.

Similar pesticide contamination cropped up the last time the state bought a sugar farm, the 50,000-acre Talisman plantation, purchased for \$133-million in 1999 from the St. Joe Co. As with Talisman, if any toxic waste is discovered on U.S. Sugar's land, U.S. Sugar will have to pay to clean it up, Wehle said.

One potential obstacle, the price tag, is fairly settled. Though the state will dispatch three appraisers to check the value of U.S. Sugar's holdings, eight months of secret negotiations between Crist's staff and the company set the maximum the state is willing to pay: \$1.75-billion.

Crist and U.S. Sugar officials hailed the potential buyout as a way to jump-start the stalled Everglades restoration project. But the Miccosukees and others are wondering whether it will siphon off all the money for construction of the other elements of the restoration plan some of which might have provided more immediate results than anything to be built on U.S. Sugar's land.

'I think we keep doing the expensive, easy thing and losing sight of what's important,' said Terry Rice, a retired Army colonel who was in charge of the corps in Florida when planning on the Everglades project began. 'If the purchase occurs, most all attention will be focused on this area at the expense of other vital restoration projects.'

Despite all the questions about the U.S. Sugar buyout, Guest, the Earthjustice attorney, contends it's too soon to start fighting over what to do with land the state doesn't own yet.

'We're arguing about the omelet recipe,' he said, 'and we haven't bought the eggs yet.'

Craig Pittman can be reached at craig@sptimes.com.

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Sugar deal won't let water flow

06/29/2008

Miami Herald - Online

CURTIS MORGAN AND SCOTT HIAASEN

Curtis Morgan-Miami Herald

State planners say the U.S. Sugar property will more likely be used to store water rather than re-create a flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

A crop duster flies over one of the sugar cane fields that will be part of the land deal between U.S. Sugar and the State of Florida to help restore the Everglades.

Gov. Charlie Crist called it the "missing link" a huge swath of sugar fields south of Lake Okeechobee long coveted by environmentalists who hope to reconnect the lake with the Everglades.

In reality, officials say, much of the farmland that the state plans to buy from the U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$1.75 billion would become the Everglades' missing storage tank a massive patchwork of dammed reservoirs, pollution treatment marshes and diesel-burning pumps.

It's hardly a picture postcard, but it's the only way engineers will be able to solve the

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biggest problem they have how to catch enough water, clean it and get it to the Everglades.

Last year only months before Crist first floated the idea of a U.S. Sugar buyout conservation groups once again urged the South Florida Water Management District to consider making a natural "flow-way" of water through Big Sugar's land.

Water managers responded the same way they had for years: They said the Everglades could end up losing more water than it gained.

Now Florida officials say those same sugar fields are the key to salvaging the state-federal Everglades restoration plan. However, they don't have any studies to show exactly how the plan would work.

That's just one of the looming questions bound up in the blockbuster sugar deal Crist announced last week. No one can say exactly how the 187,000 acres will be used or how much any future plans may ultimately cost. Also unknown: how long the deal may delay the already backlogged restoration effort.

Any reclamation of sugar fields must wait at least six years; that's how long U.S. Sugar will be allowed to operate a deadline that could be extended.

Environmental groups say it's worth the wait, that the governor's proposal does what the original Everglades plan did not it promises enough water storage south of Lake Okeechobee to revive the Glades. When planners cobbled together the restoration blueprint that was approved in 2000, Big Sugar was off-limits.

"For decades, we have been going around sugar and trying do this without a missing piece of the puzzle," said Sara Fain, Everglades coordinator for the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonpartisan advocacy group for national parks. "Now, we can look at ways to revamp the process."

Not all the major players in the Everglades negotiations are pleased, most notably the Miccosukee Tribe, which has sued the South Florida Water Management District over farm pollution flowing into the Glades and Lake Okeechobee.

"To announce something is going to happen six years from now with no plans for how they're going to do it while diverting the funding away from essential projects is a tragedy," said Dexter Lehtinen, an attorney for the Miccosukees.

VIRTUAL STANDSTILL

The U.S. Sugar buyout came just as the multibillion-dollar restoration plan seemed on the verge of paralysis, in large part because of two unresolved problems. There wasn't enough water to go around, and much of what there is remains too polluted to deliver to the Glades.

The sugar deal buys planners both more land and more time to try to solve those problems. "This obviously gives us a lot more flexibility," said Tommy Strowd, the top Everglades planner at the water management district.

But the deal will also tie up much of the state's share of Everglades funding at a time when budget worries have delayed other projects in the restoration plan. Federal funds have been so scarce that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which is co-managing the restoration, has been ordered to slash project costs.

The state typically spends about \$325 million a year on Everglades projects, said Tom Olliff, the district's assistant executive director. But the debt payments on the \$1.7 billion sugar deal will eat up as much as \$153 million of that each year.

The water district should still have about \$170 million a year to spend on other Everglades projects and land purchases, Olliff said. But some of that money must be approved annually by the Legislature, which cut Everglades funding for the budget

year that begins Tuesday.

No one has drawn plans for building on the U.S. Sugar property, but any combination of new reservoirs and marshes would certainly add billions of dollars to the price tag. For example, a 16,000-acre Everglades reservoir under construction in Palm Beach County is expected to cost taxpayers about \$800 million.

State planners are considering a field of reservoirs and marshes almost four times that size, on a swath of 62,000 acres along Lake Okeechobee's southern lip, between South Bay and Clewiston.

U.S. Sugar owns only 23,000 acres in that area. The rest must be obtained from another sugar company, Florida Crystals, and from smaller growers.

State officials say they expect to trade some of the U.S. Sugar land after the company closes, and some parcels will be sold. The state hopes to recoup \$500 million by selling U.S. Sugar's refinery and other assets.

VISION OF FLOW-WAY

Environmental groups have coveted the sugar fields east of Clewiston, but some have different visions for its use a marsh-filled "flow way" spilling naturally from the big lake down into the Everglades.

"My uncle had this idea in 1980," said John Marshall, nephew of pioneering Everglades advocate Arthur R. Marshall. "This thing will pay for itself if we can convince everybody that gravity-driven flow will work."

Scientists with the water management district and the Corps of Engineers say it won't work. Other environmental groups concur.

"It's a lovely concept," said Carol Ann Wehle, the water management district's executive director. But "you are never, ever going to have sawgrass marsh there."

Planners say the sugar fields south of the lake have lost too much earth to farming, leaving a deep bowl that would prevent any water from flowing to the south without artificial pumps. Studies also have shown that converting the sugar fields to marsh would produce so much evaporation that the Everglades could wind up with less water.

In any case, Lake Okeechobee's water is simply too polluted to pour directly into the Glades. A reservoir would allow water managers to manipulate water depths and move it where it's needed depending on rainfall and seasonal conditions.

"With a reservoir of that magnitude, there would be times it would be totally empty for extended periods," Strowd said.

REVISED BLUEPRINT?

None of the agencies involved in the restoration can say yet how much of the current Everglades plan will have to be revised or rejected.

But the district, for one, is postponing some construction projects. The state has suspended work on two reservoirs to the east and west of Lake Okeechobee, and on the 16,000-acre Palm Beach County reservoir. The cost-cutting likely is just beginning.

Water managers and environmental groups hope the cuts include any of the 300 or so underground storage wells contemplated in the original plan. The wells, estimated to cost \$3 billion, represent a scientifically dubious and ecologically reckless idea, environmentalists have complained.

"There is so much a higher level of comfort with above-ground storage. We know it

works," said Robert Johnson, director of the South Florida Natural Resource Center at Everglades National Park.

Plan to restore flow from Lake O revives arguments from '93

06/28/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Kleinberg, Eliot

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WEST PALM BEACH A century ago, water flowed in a solid sheet from the south shore of Lake Okeechobee through Florida's peninsula and into Florida Bay.

In 1993, a panel of federal scientists suggested buying the sugar cane land between the Miami and North New River canals to create a new 'flow way.' The proposal provoked a titanic political backlash and died. And for years since, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District insisted it would never work.

This week the water management district and U.S. Sugar Corp. put the concept back on the table when they struck a tentative deal to replace sugar fields with marshes that will filter water from the lake and send it again through Florida's interior. But it won't be the way it was, said Carol Wehle, executive director of the water management district. 'This is not a flow way,' Wehle said Thursday.

For one thing, the natural system has been altered too much to be returned to its original state, she said. All of the chopping, ditching and diking has caused much of the land to subside. 'If you flowed water into that land, it would just sit there like a lake,' Wehle said. The Arthur R. Marshall Foundation for Everglades Restoration disagrees. 'It is incorrect to say that gravity flow is not attainable in all cases from the Lake to the WCAs (water conservation areas),' foundation President John Marshall wrote to Wehle in January.

Joe Schweigart, an engineer and former top water management district executive, said water could flow from the lake to Water Conservation Area 3, then south into Florida Bay. 'You still have the hydraulic gradient that's ultimately going to flow water from north to south,' Schweigart said. Wehle also said that Lake Okeechobee, fouled by years of runoff and back-pumping, contains phosphorus levels of about 140 parts per billion, more than three times the goal of 40 parts per billion.

But Schweigart said the phosphorous is there regardless and would need to be filtered whether the water flowed to the sea or pooled in conservation areas.

Marshall said about half of the land that would be needed is in the proposed land deal. He said the other half is owned by other firms and suggested the district could negotiate to obtain that in exchange for U.S. Sugar land it would be buying in the northeast corner of the sugar-growing area. 'We think the other sugar folks are going to fall in line the way U.S. Sugar did,' Marshall said. He also said U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson's office asked the Corps of Engineers to conduct a cost-benefit study on restoring the flow way.

Bryan Gulley, a spokesman for Nelson, D-Fla., said Friday from Washington that the corps told Nelson that the study was budgeted for late 2009.

The yearlong effort in 1993 to agree on an Everglades restoration plan stalled in light of the report by the scientists. It contained no cost estimates or timetables.

Sugar growers said at the time that the flow way would destroy a third of their farmland.

Conditions changed, Audubon Society lobbyist Charles Lee said Friday. 'If you'd gone to U.S. Sugar in 1995 and said, 'Let's buy all your land and make it a solution for the Everglades,' they'd have thrown you out of their office,' Lee said.

Buyout called largest finance deal of its kind

06/28/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and ELIOT KLEINBERG

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JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and ELIOT KLEINBERG-Palm Beach Post

The \$1.7 billion in certificates that the South Florida Water Management District will sell to pay for the historic buyout of 187,000 acres owned by U.S. Sugar Corp. represents the largest such financing in U.S. history, The Bond Buyer reported this week.

Water managers, who have used the 'certificates of participation' to finance other projects, said this week that they plan to max out their financing powers to buy the sugar land south of the Everglades' historic headwaters.

The Bond Buyer, a daily public financing newspaper, on Thursday called it the largest such offering ever sold, citing data by the Thomson Reuters financial consulting firm.

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, ultimately will vote on whether to take on the debt.

The tax-exempt certificates, a commonly used form of lease-purchase financing, are widely used by school districts to pay for new construction projects.

Under lease-purchase agreements, nonprofit corporations set up by local governments can lease public property, sell the certificates of participation, build schools or other buildings and then lease them back.

Under the water district's plan, a nonprofit group would be formed. It would lease the land back to the district.

Water managers have said they plan to pull \$50 million from the district's reserve account to cover the remaining cost of the purchase.

Dominic Calabro, president of Florida TaxWatch, a Tallahassee-based watchdog group, called the \$1.75 billion purchase an incredible opportunity but warned that with 'great opportunity comes great risk.' 'We want to make sure the taxpayers, the people of Florida, get a good deal that is fair to everybody,' Calabro said. 'Even after getting this purchase, that is not the end of the story. It is just the end of one phase of many phases of restoring and preserving the Everglades.' Calabro said the federal government has not paid its fair share of the \$10.9 billion Everglades restoration plan. Money pledged as part of the plan should instead be used to help purchase U.S. Sugar or pay for the engineering work needed to link the company's farmland to Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. 'During the presidential campaign, I think one of the things we should do is see if either candidate would make this a meaningful commitment,' he said. 'This is the best time to get this committed, when they are in the game.'

A sweet deal? Region's environment could benefit from U.S. Sugar buyout

06/28/2008

Naples Daily News

Staats, Eric

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The shock waves from Floridas proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar south of Lake Okeechobee rippled all the way to Mike and Anita Buffs backyard in Alva.

Hallelujah, Anita Buff, 63, remembered thinking when she read about the tentative deal announced last week. I didnt think it would ever happen.

Of course, it hasnt happened yet, but that hasnt stopped the Buffs from imagining a day when clean water runs behind their house built on an oxbow of the Caloosahatchee River.

The herons and kingfishers return, thick mats of green goo dont interfere with the fishing and they dont have to stop their 8-year-old great-granddaughter from playing near the water for fear of getting sick from toxic algae.

Thats the dream anyway.

The proposed buyout brings it closer to reality by giving water managers a place to store polluted water from Lake Okeechobee rather than dumping it down the Caloosahatchee River, east of Fort Myers. But no one can say exactly how it will work.

That depends on the size of water storage areas that water managers would build on the land, how much land would be devoted to water treatment and whether a land swap can be engineered with sugar giant Florida Crystals to complete a missing link in Everglades restoration.

We have a lot more questions than answers, just like everyone else, said Tom Van Lent, senior scientist at The Everglades Foundation, a nonprofit Everglades advocacy group.

There is no question, though, about the enormity of last weeks announcement by Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Buker.

Under a statement of principles signed last week between U.S. Sugar and the South Florida Water Management District, the district would buy 187,000 acres of sugar cane fields and orange groves for \$1.75 billion.

The sale, including the companys sugar mill and refinery and a railroad, would put U. S. Sugar out of business. The company would continue to farm the land for six years. That could be extended by mutual agreement of the company and the water management district.

Carol Wehle, executive director of the Water Management District, said last week that \$1.7 billion is the max we can bring to the table, but the details of the deal still must be hammered out.

I think theres wiggle room, she said.

The district will pay \$50 million in cash from reserves, with the rest being borrowed in the form of a bond-like instrument called a certificate of participation. It will cost \$117 million annually for debt service, raising the eventual cost to \$3.5 billion including interest, the Associated Press reported last week.

The district could lower the cost by refinancing over the course of the deal or by

selling off some of U.S. Sugars assets the district wont need.

Wehle said the two sides have yet to put a value on the companys continued use of the land, backing away from statements the previous day by the districts Chief Financial Officer Paul Dumars that put the value at \$450 million.

The water management district board is set to meet Monday to give the go-ahead to begin negotiations with U.S. Sugar and approve paying for appraisals and an environmental audit of the land.

The paperwork signed last week sets a goal of having a contract negotiated by Sept. 5 and the deal closed by Nov. 30.

Im a pessimist and Im 99.9 percent sure its going to close, U.S. Sugar senior vice president Robert Coker said last week.

He said \$1.7 billion is the least the company is willing to accept: Its like trying to put an appraised value on a piece of art.

Coker credited Crist with proposing the buyout deal during a meeting in November 2007 with U.S. Sugar lobbyists carrying a litany of company concerns.

The water management district Governing Board had voted to not pump polluted water into Lake Okeechobee from sugar cane fields. That decision came after a federal judge sided with environmental groups, who had sued the water management district, claiming that the backpumping violated the Clean Water Act.

Coker said the backpumping decision was immaterial to the companys decision to pursue a buyout but later said the decision was among the concerns lobbyists brought to Crist that day.

Coker wasnt there, but the way he tells it, Crist suggested the buyout halfway through the conversation, stunning the lobbyists, who caught their breath, picked themselves off the floor _ and kept listening.

Selling out was not in our vocabulary, Coker said.

But in the weeks to come, Crist convinced company officials that the deal was more than a business transaction but a chance for them to have a role in a bold plan to save the Everglades, Coker said.

When he gets his mind made up, hes real persuasive, Coker said.

The U.S. Sugar land is a piece of a puzzle that water managers are trying to put together south of Lake Okeechobee to reconnect the lake to the rest of the Everglades.

The \$10 billion Everglades restoration plan has had to work around the fact that sugar cane fields have been off-limits, but the U.S. Sugar deal changes all that.

Somebodys got to nudge something to get the dominos to fall, get the doors and windows to open, said Rae Ann Wessel, natural resources policy director for the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation. This is a huge piece. Weve thrown the doors open with this.

A U.S. Sugar buyout is spurring talk of a possible swap of land with another sugar giant, Florida Crystals, to complete the puzzle.

Florida Crystals owns 35,000 acres between U.S. Sugars holdings and existing water treatment areas at the northern edge of the Everglades. The company is willing to talk, vice president Gaston Cantens said.

Its not as simple as sitting in front of a map and saying, Heres 35,000 acres here, heres 35,000 acres there, lets swap, he said. But were certainly going to approach it in a very open-minded, positive way.

The swap is key to figuring out how much relief the Caloosahatchee River gets.

Van Lent, with The Everglades Foundation, estimates that if water managers can store 1 million acre-feet of water south of Lake Okeechobee (enough water to fill 500,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools or, spread one foot deep, to cover the state of Rhode Island) it would cut the discharges to the Caloosahatchee to the west and St. Lucie River to the east by 85 percent.

The releases choke out sea grasses and oyster beds, chase away fish and other wildlife and fuel algae blooms that rob the water of oxygen and release toxins.

Fewer discharges from the lake also could help drastically decrease red tides at the beaches, Van Lent said.

I dont think we know there will be no more red tides, he said.

From his house on the edge of the Caloosahatchee River, Mike Buff, 63, said hes not expecting restoration to be perfect or quick.

That doesnt mean the price tag of the U.S. Sugar deal isnt worth it to his great-granddaughters future.

If that generation has an opportunity to fish rather than have a cesspool, its worth every bit of effort we put into it now, Buff said.

Sugar deal financing plan pushes land cost higher

06/29/2008

TMCnet.com

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(South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT) Via Acquire Media NewsEdge) FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. _ Like a home loan on steroids, 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 keeps growing. The eventual cost of the deal Gov. Charlie Crist announced last week could actually double, hitting \$3.5 billion, based on interest payments during a 30-year financing plan proposed for the purchase.

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 South Florida Water Management District 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.

Just like a home buyer relying on a mortgage, interest payments over the life of the deal could make the final payment a far cry from the number Crist touted.

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. '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.

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 last 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 anticipates paying 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 also help pay for the land to diminish the long-term cost, Estenoz 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.

Some Florida members of Congress said the land deal will strengthen their case for federal spending. 'This is a huge benefit,' said U.S. Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Democrat and 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, a Republican 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.' (END OPTIONAL TRIM)

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 one-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 yet another way to pay off the debt sooner.

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Environmentalists want a more-natural Everglades plan

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Fleshler, David

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David Fleshler-South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The original plan for restoring the Everglades would tighten human control over the battered, shrunken South Florida wilderness.

Artificial wells drilled 1,000 feet into the earth. Walled, above-ground reservoirs. Diesel-powered pumps.

The land of alligators, herons and panthers faced a future on the ecological equivalent of a heart-lung machine, with complex oil-powered, computer-controlled engineering works moving water through the ecosystem.

Although many environmentalists and scientists have supported the plan as better than nothing, they remain uncomfortable with what they see as a blueprint for a facade of natural wetlands supported by an artificial, ugly water system designed by the Army Corps of Engineers. The U.S. Sugar acquisition could change all of this. The surprise announcement last week that the state of Florida would buy all 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s land could eliminate the need for a lot of the steel-and-cement elements of the restoration plan.

If the deal is consummated, it would restore the primeval link between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, allowing a simpler method of moving water through the marshes than the elaborate waterworks of the plan. Engineers could stop trying to work around U.S. Sugar's enormous land holdings, eliminating a major cause of the plan's technological complexity. 'None of us anticipated when we started Everglades restoration that we'd have a bunch of Army Corps-designed pump stations in the middle of the Everglades,' said Eric Draper, lobbyist for Audubon of Florida, an environmental group active in Everglades restoration. 'Maybe this land gives us the opportunity to do this differently.' Work has stopped on a 25-square-mile above-ground reservoir in western . Another element likely to be scaled back: a system of 333 wells. They are to be drilled throughout central and southern Florida to store billions of gallons of fresh water until it's needed at the surface.

Priced at up to \$3 billion, this was the most expensive single part of the restoration plan. With the availability of the U.S. Sugar land for water storage, up to two-thirds of the wells could be eliminated, said Shannon Estenoz, vice chair of the South Florida Water Management District's governing board.

The Everglades plan, approved in 2000 by the state and federal governments, is intended to restore the health of an ecosystem that has been shrunken, dried out and polluted by urban and agricultural development for more than a century.

While the U.S. Sugar deal would restore the link between the lake and the Everglades, state and federal officials say it would not eliminate all of the heavy engineering. They say the water won't get from the lake to the Everglades without human help. Decades of drainage and farming have transformed the sugar company's land, they said, replacing the gentle downward slope with a bowl-like depression. 'If you sent water there, it would pond up, it wouldn't flow,' said Ruth Clements, the water management district's director of land acquisition and development. 'That's why you need levees and pumps.' Clements said the U.S. Sugar holdings would be transformed into a reservoir near the lake and a series of marshes to the south that would hold

water for the greater Everglades system. The marshes, used to cleanse the lake water of phosphorus, would also provide habitat for alligators, turtles and wading birds.

But many environmentalists challenge the need for pumps and levees to move the water, saying such plans simply show the preference of engineers for technological solutions. 'There's clearly a philosophical divide between the Corps, who want to build more structures, and those of us who believe that nature can do a good job by itself,' said Stuart Pimm, professor of conservation ecology at Duke University. 'Yes, it could be a natural system, but only if the Corps could be persuaded not to over-engineer it.' Despite the debate that has begun over the land's future, no one challenges the importance of the purchase. Reducing sugar farming would improve the health of ecosystems across the southern third of the Florida peninsula, from the seagrass beds of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts that suffer from artificial discharges of fresh water to the polluted waters of Lake Okeechobee and the parched sawgrass marshes of . And it could revive a moribund restoration effort that was suffering from climbing costs and a lack of federal dollars to match the state's investment.

Stuart Appelbaum, Everglades restoration chief for the Corps, said the permanent changes by humans to the environment mean the Everglades can't function naturally as it had in the past. But he said the U.S. Sugar deal offers a chance to rethink the 8-year-old restoration blueprint, and government agencies, scientists, environmental groups and other stakeholders have much to do in the coming months. 'Obviously it presents a lot of new possibilities for us,' he said. 'We're very excited about the news.' Environmentalists don't buy the arguments for the creation of another engineered system on the U.S. Sugar land. They say a natural flow of water, even if inferior to what existed before, is preferable to any managed water system. 'We should not try to create something that mimics with pumps and computers what the Everglades ecosystem was,' said David Guest, attorney for EarthJustice, an environmental group that successfully sued to stop the sugar farms from discharging polluted water into the lake. 'We need to restore the Everglades itself.' David Fleshler can be reached at dfleshler@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4535.

Oceanographer From Philly Explains Impact of Everglades Deal

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The Bullentin

Connolly, John

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By: John P. Connolly, The Bulletin

Dr. Christopher J. Madden, an Everglades oceanographer and Philadelphia native, gave background and insights on the Everglades Restoration Program in a special interview with The Bulletin.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist announced recently that the state would buy U.S. Sugar's holdings in the Everglades south of Lake Okeechobee, opening 187,000 acres to the restoration project. Dr. Madden said the deal was a historic step forward for a one-of-a-kind ecosystem.

"It's an environmental quantum leap forward for the Everglades," he said. "The restoration was not moving ahead because special interest groups were holding things up. Now we can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Dr. Madden is the lead researcher for the Everglades Research Division, a subdivision of the South Florida Water Management District. He was born and raised in Maple Glen, where he was a member of St. Alphonsus Parish. He earned his degree in biological sciences/ecology from Cornell University in 1980, and a M.S. in marine sciences from Louisiana State University. He earned his doctorate in oceanography and coastal science from Louisiana State in 1992, and has been working in Florida since 1996.

Dr. Madden explained that the Everglades have suffered damage to the ecosystem three main areas: in land, in water and in pollution.

As development of cities and suburbs has progressed, Everglades land has been taken up, displacing certain species from native habitats. Huge flocks of birds native to the Everglades, called supercolonies, have become more rare. The Florida panther has almost become extinct, largely because it has been forced out of its native habitat. Heightened development led to a loss of water for the Everglades, as water was redirected from Lake Okeechobee, the heart of the ecosystem, away from the Everglades to leave solid land to build on and farm.

"The agricultural industry has a vested interest in keeping the land dry," said Dr. Madden. "It's also contributed to the pollution problem by creating a large inflow of fertilizer and pesticides into the system."

But Dr. Madden says that restoring the Everglades runs into a problem because development can't be easily undone. Scientists eventually hit on the idea of "re-plumbing" the Everglades, a project that would use engineering to bypass development and return natural water flow to Everglades National Park.

"The Everglades has its own hydrology," explained Dr. Madden. "In the rainy season, water levels would be higher, and levels would be lower in the dry season.

Development damaged that hydrology, and re-plumbing is trying to restore some of that natural flow, using pumping stations that would pump water into those areas."

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is collaboration between federal and state organizations to install such a re-plumbing system. The plan had been slowed while officials tried to find a way to acquire the necessary land and move the project forward. The announcement of a deal between U.S. Sugar and Florida is a jump-start to the plan, and which may herald more land concessions.

"It could help other things break free, such as land swaps with other farming industries," said Dr. Madden.

U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Bucher called the deal "monumental" but also noted he was saddened to see the demise of his company, which employs 1,700 people.

"We built a company that right now is the pillar of the agriculture community in Florida," Mr. Bucher said. "Because of that, I stand here today with mixed feelings ... On the other hand, I'm excited about what we're doing here today."

Dr. Madden shared in the excitement of the announcement, emphasizing the importance of acquiring the U.S. Sugar lands, which farm a large swathe of land just to the south of Lake Okeechobee.

"What [acquiring] this particular piece of land does is enable for the first time since the 1930s the re-connecting of the headwaters of the system and the Everglades," he said.

The deal will purchase U.S. Sugar for \$1.75 billion, with U.S. Sugar going out of business in six years' time. Officials hope to sign the final agreement as early as September.

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Everglades restoration to evolve

06/29/2008

News-Press

Hiraki, Ryan

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U.S. Sugar deal signals more change
By Ryan Hiraki • News-Press

A multibillion dollar plan to restore the Everglades and cleanse the Caloosahatchee River may be modified now that the state expects to purchase 300 square miles of farmland.

Ridding the Everglades of pollutants using an underground well system is part of the project, which could cost as much as \$30 billion. But the state's \$1.75 billion proposal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. will provide a lot of land to cleanse and store southbound water coming from Lake Okeechobee - something not considered when Congress approved restoration plans in 1999.

So changes are imminent. The unknowns are what exactly will be done, how it will affect costs and how it will change the timetable to protect the Caloosahatchee and the Everglades from more pollution.

Gov. Charlie Crist announced last week the state has a tentative agreement to buy U. S. Sugar for \$1.75 billion and acquire the company's 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee. With interest costs from borrowing money to make the payment over 30 years, the state will end up spending \$3.5 billion.

The plan would let the sugar company operate for six more years, providing a transition period for workers to find other jobs and for Hendry County to find other economic opportunities to soften the blow of losing about 25 percent of its tax base.

Assuming that deal goes through, one of the major changes could be a land swap between the state and another sugar company, Florida Crystals Corp. The company owns 31,000 acres in the path water would flow to the Everglades, said Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the agency planning to use tax dollars and borrowed money to make the deal.

The state may have to give Florida Crystals an equivalent piece of land, part of the land the state would acquire from U.S. Sugar, to acquire Florida Crystals' land. That would help create the path for water needed for restoration.

Another major piece ripe for change is the project to construct underground wells, 330 of them - 200 around Lake Okeechobee, the rest scattered along the east coast and along the Caloosahatchee. Some 44 wells are near the proposed C-43 reservoir along the south side of the river just east of the Lee County line.

"We're going to have to obviously go through some kind of reformulation, some kind of planning effort to incorporate the storage and water treatment that 187,000 acres affords us," said Stu Appelbaum, deputy for restoration program management with the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers. "But it's too early to say. The short answer is, we're not sure" what will happen.

Maybe fewer underground wells are needed now.

"I can envision (fewer) would be needed as a result of all that additional surface water storage, but that's still to be determined," Appelbaum said.

Importance

Water treatment along the Caloosahatchee is essential to protect the \$2 billion the county's tourism industry produces. Kurt Harclerode, Lee's natural resources operations manager, wants the river to remain a priority.

"We know there's likely going to be shifts in resources," he said. "But we think those projects on the table should remain there."

The 10,500-acre reservoir, estimated at \$500 million, can store water after heavy rain

and send water down the river during a drought, which South Florida has suffered through the last couple of years, until recent rainfall provided relief.

"Our river is like the three bears: not too much, not too little, just right," Harclerode said.

U.S. Rep. Connie Mack IV, R-Fort Myers, seized the opportunity last month to lobby U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., for money to build the reservoir. Oberstar, who chairs the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, was in LaBelle last month at the request of congressional colleague Tim Mahoney, the Palm Beach Gardens Democrat whose district includes Hendry County.

"I remain committed to continuing to work with the governor and state and local officials as we strive to ensure that the federal government does its part to make this vital initiative a success," Mack said.

Construction on the reservoir could begin in two years but that depends on money. The latest sum Congress has made available for Everglades restoration is \$385 million, to remove roads and fill canals in the Picayune Strand in Collier County. Work likely will begin next year, according to the Army Corps.

Congress is expected to debate another \$235 million for more projects, but that bill has not made it to the floor of the House or the Senate yet, only through a House committee.

Bryan Gulley, spokesman for U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said the senator is taking a wait-and-see approach because the sugar deal still is not final and might not be sooner than November.

"This is a new development on the horizon and it has a chance to be a great one," he said.

- The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Big sugar took its lumps, then dealt

06/29/2008

Orlando Sentinel - Tallahassee Bureau

Kennedy, John

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John Kennedy and Aaron Deslatte-OrlandoSentinel

The idea for the biggest public land purchase in Florida history was born in November when Gov. Charlie Crist visited two lobbyists who were among his best fundraisers when he ran for governor the previous year.

Brian Ballard and Mac Stipanovich also represented U.S. Sugar Corp., the nation's largest cane-sugar producer, which was under increasing attack for dumping polluted farm runoff into Lake Okeechobee.

The lobbyists wanted Crist to tell regulators to back off.

"We were just warming up our pitch when the governor spoke," Stipanovich said. "He said, 'I have an idea that might solve all our problems: Why don't we just buy you out?' "

The idea offered an end to a three-decade war over the future of the Florida Everglades, a dispute that had seen environmentalists and four governors and regulators frustrated at every turn by the company they called Big Sugar.

And last week, after seven months of top-secret huddles between the state and company officials, Crist's idea became a formal proposal: \$1.75 billion to buy U.S. Sugar "lock, stock and barrel."

If finalized by November, the state will take over U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres of land, its sugar mill, railroad and citrus-processing facilities. Within six years, Big Sugar will be gone.

And the rich, black muck farmland that has grown cane since the 1930s will be used to re-create natural water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

"We've been asking governors to buy them off for a long time," said Mary Barley, the wealthy Florida Keys environmentalist who helps head the Everglades Trust and has gone to war with Big Sugar time and again through the years.

"They finally saw an opportunity to get what they wanted."

Hardball player weakened

Barley's environmentalists spent \$15 million in 1996 to ask voters to finance Everglades restoration by taxing sugar growers a penny per pound. Big Sugar beat them with a \$24 million media blitz -- the costliest fight over a ballot question in state history.

It was typical of how U.S. Sugar played hardball.

During the past four years alone, the company directed nearly \$5 million to state candidates and political causes. It almost single-handedly took out Democrat Jim Davis in the 2006 gubernatorial primary with a wave of racially charged attack ads over his 1990 vote to deny Freddie Lee Pitts and Wilbert Lee compensation for their wrongful convictions in a 1963 Panhandle slaying.

But by the time Crist sat down with Ballard and Stipanovich at Ballard's office a stately white mansion a half-mile from the Florida Capitol the company needed help imposing its will.

In late 2006, a federal judge ruled the company's practice of back-pumping its phosphorus-laden farm runoff into Lake Okeechobee violated the Clean Water Act.

Meanwhile, a \$10 billion federal-state pact to restore water flow to the Everglades was imposing ever-stricter pollution requirements on sugar growers.

Trouble deepened in late August 2007, when the South Florida Water Management District board voted 4-3 to stop the pumping. All of the majority were Crist appointees.

Said Manley Fuller, president of the Florida Wildlife Federation, which along with Earthjustice brought the lawsuit, "It meant that the old way of doing things had to change."

Erik Eikenberg, the governor's chief of staff, said Crist began developing the idea of a buyout of U.S. Sugar soon after the vote. Environmentalists close to the governor, including Barley, Fuller, Wall Street hedge-fund manager Paul Tudor Jones and lawyer Thom Rumberger, urged a buyout.

A map hanging on Eikenberg's office wall clearly showed the company's holdings as a major obstacle to restoring natural water flow south of Lake Okeechobee.

"Even the governor would walk by that map and look at what U.S. Sugar represented there," Eikenberg said. "It's clear they're in the way."

A 'duh' moment

Crist's casual suggestion to Ballard and Stipanovich that November evening belied the tectonic shift it represented in Everglades -- and Florida -- politics.

"It's Nixon recognizing China," said John French, a lobbyist and longtime Tallahassee political operative who has worked for the sugar industry through the years.

Crist, whom even admirers acknowledge avoids the details of public-policy issues, came at the Everglades free of the animosities and technical complexities that long had stalled negotiations between U.S. Sugar, the state and environmentalists.

Instead, Ballard said, Crist boiled the issue down to its basics.

"He said, 'If sugar is polluting the Everglades, and we're paying to clean the Everglades, why don't we just get rid of sugar?'" Ballard said.

"I think for all of us, it was one of those kind of 'duh' moments," Stipanovich added.

Stipanovich and Ballard brought the governor's offer to Clewiston, the small company town just south of Lake Okeechobee's shore.

"It was breathtaking" but also emphatic, said Robert Coker, the company's senior vice president.

"It was clear that it was looking like the governor had his jaw set on this one. He can be very persuasive," Coker added.

Closing a chapter of history

Given the company's problems, U.S. Sugar's board decided the idea was worth exploring, Coker said. The company's West Palm Beach law firm, Gunter, Yoakley & Stewart, worked with Crist's office.

It wasn't until February that the South Florida Water Management District which will finance the deal through bonds backed by property-tax collections was brought into the discussions. The 16-county district stretches from Orlando to the Keys.

When district Director Carole Wehle was first briefed about the idea by the Governor's Office in Tallahassee, she started to laugh until she realized everyone else in the room was serious.

Officials say the deal threatened to disintegrate several times, the latest just two weeks ago in a dispute over how the state would acquire some of the company's fringe land holdings.

And the water district still must determine the value of letting the company continue farming for six years. Then, it must decide what to sell or swap to fill gaps in the U.S. Sugar holdings and create a contiguous flow-way for water to move south into the Everglades.

State environmental officials have suggested some land could be used for growing cane for biofuel.

By week's end, it appeared that all sides are determined to get the deal done.

"It's really the closing of a chapter of Florida history," Coker said. "But for us, it was a fair deal. For Floridians it's a fair deal. And it's good for the Everglades. There are no losers in this."

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Such a sweet deal

06/29/2008

Charlotte Sun Herald

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Derek Dunn-Rankin-Charlotte Sun Herald

Such a sweet deal

Good morning.

It is the story of the year. Tuesday's announcement by Governor Crist of a \$1.7 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar property was just a day before he opened his second environmental summit. The land purchase includes 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. The surprise announcement contemplates the South Florida Water Management District, or Softmud, raising the money for the deal, the details of which have yet to be negotiated and approved by the water authority board.

How, you might wonder, could this have been kept a secret? According to Miami Herald reporters Curtis Morgan and Scott Hiaasen, it began in November when two high-powered lobbyists for U.S. Sugar were appealing to the governor for help with water restrictions that affected their client. 'Why doesn't the state just buy the company?' the governor asked.

The vehicle to make the purchase is the largest of the state's five water-management districts. Softmud's nine-member board is appointed by the governor. Its territory includes a small slice of Charlotte County, south of the Peace River watershed. It extends from above Lake Okeechobee and includes 16 counties from Orlando to Key West. The populous and thirsty Gold Coast, from above Palm Beach through Fort Lauderdale and Miami-Dade, looks to the district for future water needs. It is the lead organization in the federal-state Everglades restoration project, budgeted at more than \$10 billion.

The governor lost some of his environmental credits when he supported Senator McCain's policy of opening the possibility of offshore drilling for oil in the Gulf. He has certainly balanced his pro-environment image with this bold move.

The deal is huge in the impact it will have on the billions planned for Everglades restoration. The dollar impact is much more than the \$1.7 billion in cash to U.S. Sugar.

That is just part of the cost to taxpayers. Softmud will borrow most of the purchase cost and pay interest on the debt certificates for years to come. In fact, the \$1.7 billion was not enough to get U.S. Sugar to agree to the sale. By letting the company use the land for another six years, the district has sweetened the deal for the seller.

Carol Wehle, executive director for the Softmud, expects negotiations to take another 75 days or so before the deal goes before the board for a vote of approval. Then there will be costs as the district tries to swap out some of the acreage with other growers to get the best configuration to assist in the grand plan of Everglades restoration.

The water boards are the only organizations that can levy a property tax without having to face an election or any voter approval of their expenditures. Their authority would raise the wrath of our ancestors, who organized the Boston Tea Party or fought a revolution over taxation without representation. In this case, their wide authority may pay big dividends for Floridians.

There's Nothing Cynical About Everglades Deal

06/29/2008

Tampa Tribune - Online

THOM RUMBERG

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Thom Rumberg-Tampa Tribune

Those of us who have devoted decades to reversing the devastation visited upon the nation's Everglades dared not even dream any longer that this day might come.

Yet in the mind and heart of every lover of the Everglades this was the one great, perpetual wish: To buy back as much land as possible for the restoration of the Everglades.

And then, incredibly, there we stood Tuesday upon that very land in the Everglades as Gov. Charlie Crist, U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Buker and South Florida Water Management District Vice Chair Shannon A. Estenoz took the stage.

The governor announced the state's planned purchase of 187,000 acres of the most ecologically critical real estate in the hemisphere.

The purchase will directly benefit millions of residents of South Florida, providing clean water through a replenished aquifer. The purchase will benefit the dwindling populations of birds, endangered species, and all other wildlife. And above all this purchase will hasten the hour when the toxic streams of farming-related pollution that now course corrosively through the Everglades' delicate web of life will become but a murky memory.

We were aware that discussions leading up to the announcement were underway as long ago as November and so we are more than a little troubled by the suggestions this week by some severely misinformed critics who have pounced on the governor's move as some sort of political stunt.

People should ignore the sniping. First, it's important to allow us a chance to enjoy this uniquely nonpartisan moment. Secondly, many supporters of the Everglades have given political support and contributions to both Republicans and Democrats.

The hundreds of environmental groups, attorneys, individual citizens and government officials who have contributed to this moment deserve more than seeing their hard work drowned out by the fussing of political opportunists.

Those political long knives who suggest the governor announced the land purchase this week to improve an undeclared shot at becoming a vice presidential running mate, or to somehow deflect scrutiny of his current call for a reasoned look at whether our changing geopolitical world requires reconsidering our state's traditional opposition to drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico, are in need of a serious reality check.

The relevant context for the announcement is this. The conversation over the purchase of this land began eight months ago - long before there was talk about Gov. Crist joining a presidential ticket. Additionally, the announcement was made this week because it was ripe for announcing. And what better time than on the eve of the second Florida Summit on Global Climate Change when most of the state's environmental groups, the water management district, and the state's news media are present? That's just smart communication.

Sometimes when courageous legacy-building steps are taken by a bold policy maker eager to deal with the new realities in ways to benefit every single one of us, the

graceful response is appreciation, praise, or humble silence.

Thom Rumberger is chairman of the Everglades Trust and has been defending the Everglades for more than two decades.

Sugar land purchase will turn out raw if

06/27/2008

Naples Daily News

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Theres something odd about the \$1.75 billion Big Sugar buyout plan, as reported on page 8 of todays edition.

On one hand, its really good to see Big Sugar is on the way out. Taxpayers have subsidized that industry with millions of dollars each year so sugar can rot in silos. Translation: We pay an industry to pollute our lands.

Sugar farming nearly ruined the Everglades; and whos paying to fix it? We are.

Now the 800-pound gorilla is being bought out, again with our tax dollars. Is this a real Everglades project, or is it simply a way to keep the sugar folks from suffering the same economic woes that many of us face?

I was a reporter years ago when the Everglades restoration plan was first being approved. It was a golden environmental era of big promises about how the River of Grass was going to be restored to at least part of its former glory.

It sounded good, even though the people who destroyed and polluted the lands werent the ones paying the bill.

The pitch was that state and federal agencies would devote \$8 billion to clean up the Everglades system, which historically stretched from south of Orlando to Florida Bay and the Keys. These entities were going to clean up the polluted water flowing into our backyards, and ensure that the brackish waterways here would thrive for generations to come.

Even then there were skeptics, people who wondered aloud if the money would be spent in the proper way and not just diverted for political reasons.

Theyd say: These are the same people that screwed it up anyway. And now were going to trust them to fix it.

Its a valid point. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (think levees near New Orleans) dredged much of this region in the early 1900s with the idea of turning swamplands into tame areas where people could live and farm.

Water was to be moved away from lands as fast as possible, not be allowed to trickle through the vegetation and limestone that purified Everglades waters for thousands of years.

Now were short on water. Rainfall that used to accumulate in swamps and slowly move toward the Gulf of Mexico is being forced through canals and pump systems. We get nearly 5 feet of precipitation a year, yet we have watering restrictions because we dont know how to best manage the resource.

The dredge-and-drain approach didnwork, and now taxpayers are left to trust government agencies outside of Southwest Florida to clean up this mess, our mess.

Phasing out the sugar industry could certainly help, but theres something askew about this latest Everglades action.

Over time, people move on. They forget how things got the way they are.

Then theres no one left to say, Hey, wait a minute. Youre doing what?

And some politicians and development interests bank on that.

But like with the dredges, we may not find out the truth until its too late.

New life for Everglades, but what about workers?

06/27/2008

Scripps Howard News Service

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Kit Bradshaw-Scripps Howard News Service

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.

SFWMD 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 importantly, 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.

(Distributed by Scripps Howard News Service, <http://www.scrippsnews.com>)

Everglades restoration is really on Track now.

06/27/2008

PressMethod

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PressMethod

Per an article in Florida Trend, United States Sugar Corp. has tentatively signed off on a plan to end its operations in the next six years and give the South Florida Water Management District control of its land and other assets, including its sugar mill and rail lines.

The land can hold and cleanse as much as 325 billion gallons of water, which would be used to restore the Everglades and aid South Florida's water supply, according to the non-profit Everglades Foundation. 'We really consider this plan a once-in-a-generation opportunity,' said foundation Chief Executive Officer Kurt Fordham said in a telephone news conference. 'This is something the environmental community has been clamoring for for years

Big Pine Key Florida June 27th, 2008. Per Florida Keys and Summerland Key REALTOR, Abby Oglesbee. This is very good news for both our residents and future residents. It means that the quality of the environment will be preserved.

When asked how this could affect Real Estate in the Keys, abby remarked, The environment is what the Keys are all about. it is basically what our unique set of islands have to offer. So this is really great news as it preserves the value for both existing and new home owners.

About Abby Oglesbee Abby is a Top producing Real Estate agent and the owner of a Florida Keys website located at www.yourkeystoparadise.com designed specifically to help people relocating to the lower Florida Keys and the Key West area

Editorial In praise of the Everglades

06/27/2008

Guardian Unlimited

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In the Florida Everglades the elements combine. Water sculpts the earth, while porous rock channels the water. Fire, sparked by frequent thunderstorms, burns up plants, spreading nutrients and speeding the flow of water. In turn, rainwater contains the flames. These elemental equilibria give rise to a unique ecology. Marshy sawgrass prairies and varied woodlands form the habitat for 14 species listed as under threat, including the Florida panther, the American crocodile and the wood stork. The area's importance has long been recognised. In 1947 President Truman dedicated much of it a national park, with the words 'Here is land, tranquil in its quiet beauty, serving not as the source of water, but as the last receiver of it'. Sadly, the Everglade's claim on its aquatic lifeblood has been continually compromised. Neighbouring land has been drained and water has been siphoned off to towns and sugar farms: the marshland is now half its original size. In 2000 President Clinton signed into law a restoration plan, but his successor in the White House has refused to provide the federal funds it required. This week, however, things took a turn for the better, when the state of Florida signalled plans to purchase 187,000 acres of farmland to be converted into reservoirs and marshes, to slake the Everglades' thirst. The details need tying down, and business lobbies may still put up resistance. If they do, they must be faced down. Restoring the Everglades cannot be allowed to sink into the swamp again.

Good news for Everglades

06/27/2008

Daily Press

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Daily Press

Florida is spending about \$1.75 billion to purchase nearly 300 square miles (187,000 acres) of land now used to grow sugar cane that lies between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Over the next six years, as the land is turned over, it will become managed in such a way as to allow the lake to drain into the Everglades, helping restore that natural treasure. The Everglades a National Park have suffered because of water diversion and because the water that does make it in often is filled with chemicals used in agriculture.

Everglades purchase called breathtaking by environmentalists

06/27/2008

PressMethod

PressMethod

Per an article in Florida Trend magazine, U.S. Sugar Corp. plans to announce a deal to sell the state 187,000 acres in the Everglades for \$1.75-billion.

If approved, it would be the largest conservation purchase the state has ever made, helping restore the ecosystem's natural flow and providing a quantum leap to the effort to clean up the Everglades. 'It's like the Louisiana Purchase for the Everglades,' said John Marshall of the Arthur R. Marshall Foundation, an advocacy group.

Key Largo Fl, June 27th 2008 Local Key Largo Realtor, Sally Stribling remarked, That is great news for the state of Florida and reinforces the fact that Florida will continue to be a great place to live, because we are preserving our precious environment. When asked if this could help the Real Estate Market: Sally remarked- The environment is what the Keys are all about. Potential buyers need to know that Florida is serious about preserving the Everglades

About Sally Stribling Sally is a Top producing Florida Keys Real Estate agent for Coldwell Banker Schmitt and the owner of the Florida website www.keysbestproperty.com designed specifically to help people relocating to The upper Florida Keys and it's communities.

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How Crist re-greened himself

06/27/2008

Daytona Beach News-Journal, The

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By MARK LANE-Daytona Beach News-Journal

FOOTNOTE

Looks like it's time for a declarification.

A clarification is when something misleading or ambiguous in a story is made clearer. A declarification is needed when something was presented too simply in a complicated and unclear world.

Last week, this column posited a familiar narrative regarding Gov. Charlie Crist. The narrative is: Politician Runs as an Environmental Guy But Sells Out at the First Good Opportunity. Any competent Florida political columnist writes this story a few times a year. Political Rule of Thumb: Once a politician turns on a major environmental stand, they never look back.

Gov. Crist had used his opposition to offshore oil drilling to define himself as a Post-Bush Brothers, New Model Republican but flip-flopped when the president and Sen. John McCain pushed for new drilling. This was sold with the false promise that it would make gas prices drop soon.

Like many people, I figured this was the end to Crist's career as 'the green governor.' He clearly wants to be vice president, so instead of being a New Model Republican, he's reverting to old-fashioned, drill-and-bulldoze Republicanism.

Declarification: It's more complicated than that. With Crist, it's usually more complicated than that.

Oh sure, he ungracefully performed a major reversal that won't help motorists until I'm collecting Social Security, and maybe not then, and he did it to make his new friends happy. But it turns out he had something in the works for his old friends, something big. What looked like a craven selling out of his still-developing green governor image turned out to be an early withdrawal of political capital.

Thus, the governor announced Tuesday that the state had a deal to buy U.S. Sugar and with it an area of land more than half the size of Flagler County. This land is south of Lake Okeechobee and north of Everglades National Park. This land has been a huge missing link in Everglades restoration.

Buying out the sugar giant could cut the acres of environmentally destructive sugar farming in South Florida almost in half. It would protect the land from being turned into urban sprawl after sugar-growing ended. And the land could be used to restore a healthy flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

While accomplishing all this, the deal could give new life to the stalled-out Everglades restoration effort and prod Congress and a new president to throw new federal money to a major swing state.

This is nothing less than a treaty to end a political war going back to the 1930s, and the good guys would win.

This is such a big deal that it gives Crist political room to give in on oil drilling -- something he now claims to support only if it is 'far enough, safe enough, clean enough' -- while not being viewed by environmentalists as one more politician who used them for photo ops only to sell them out.

Indeed, Florida environmental icon Nathaniel Reed evoked another icon when he wrote Crist on Wednesday to say, 'Marjory (Stoneman Douglas) is looking down on you with a smile on her face.'

And with any drilling a decade away while an Everglades deal is within grasp, Crist should be out of town before anybody is too mad at him.

Declarification: This was a far more carefully calibrated move than anyone suspected last week.

ONCE AGAIN, YOU HAVE ENCOURAGING NEWS THERE FOR A LAND PURCHASE FOR THE EVERGLADES.

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06/27/2008

Weather Channel, The

SCOUTING FOR FUN THIS WEEKEND? LET'S TAKE YOU TO FLORIDA. WE HAVE NICOLE MITCHELL DOWN THERE OUR TRAVEL ANALYST. ONCE AGAIN, YOU HAVE ENCOURAGING NEWS THERE FOR A LAND PURCHASE FOR THE EVERGLADES. A HUGE LAND PURCHASE, THOUSANDS AND THOUSANDS OF ACRES. COSTS ABOUT \$2 BILLION BUT WORTH IT, THAT WILL REFURBISH THOSE WET LAND AREAS OUT THERE. THAT WILL BE A GOOD DEAL. I FIGURED I WOULD TAKE US OFF ON A SCENIC DRIVE THROUGH SOME AREAS THAT ARE ALREADY PART OF THE EVERGLADES THAT YOU CAN GET TO NOW. THIS IS A 15-MILE ROUND TRIP EXCURSION TAKING YOU THROUGH THE WATERY ROAD OF MANGROVES, PORPOISES, THE STATE OF FLORIDA JUST ADDED 200,000 ACRES OF LAND TO THE EVERGLADES. A GREAT PLACE TO GO. ANY TIME YOU WANT TO HEAD THERE, THIS TIME OF YEAR TEMPERATURES ARE IN THE UPPER 80s. CHECK THOSE SPECIFIC TEMPERATURES AT WEATHER. COM AND CHECK OUT DIFFERENT DRIVES HERE. ALL RIGHT. THANK YOU. WARM AND MUGGY AIR BACK OVER THE EASTERN SEABOARD. MORE STORMS LIKELY. YESTERDAY THE PITTSBURGH PIRATES HAD A RAIN-OUT.

ANOTHER 6 YEARS AND EVERGLADES RESTORATION WILL BEGIN.

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06/27/2008

WPBF News 25 at 11 PM - WPBF-TV

WPBF News 25 at 11 PM - WPBF-TV

A BILLION DOLLAR BUY-OUT AS THE SWEETEST TOWN ON EDGE. SWEET THE STATE ANNOUNCED 80,000-ACRES OF FARM LAND. THAT SURPRISED THE COMPANY 1700 EMPLOYEES MOST OF WHOM LIVE THERE. IT WILL TAKE MOST OF THE TOWN WITH IT. THE COMPANY WILL CONTINUE TO FARM THE LAND F FOR A ANOTHER 6 YEARS AND EVERGLADES RESTORATION WILL BEGIN. TODAY AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT THAT FARM LAND FROM THE AIR. CATHLEEN O'TOOLE I GIVES YOU THE BIRDS EYE VIEW. WITH WELLINGTON FADING AWAY THE PILOT TAKES US OUT PAST THE OUT P WILDLIFE REFUGE. THIS IS THE CANAL . THE MISSING LINK. EVEN FLYING BACK WARDS THE EVERGLADES FOUNDATION CAN FOCUS IN ON ALL THE DETAILS. THE \$1.7 BILLION DEAL THAT GORNOR ANNOUNCED TUESDAY. THIS WILL DO MORE TO HELP WITH THE SITUATION THAN ANYTHING EVER PROPOSED IN THE HISTORY OF SOUTH FLORIDA. THE PLAN TAKE 187,000-ACRES OF CANE FIELDS OWNED BY USSUGAR AND TURN THEM INTO CLEANING WATER THAT WILL NOURISH THE EVERGLADES. A BIG PART OF THIS IS TO USE THE LAND, CONSOLIDATE IT SO WE CAN BUILD RESERVOIRS WHICH

ARE BANK ACCOUNTS FOR WATER AND PUT WATER IN THERE WHEN IT'S WET AND TAKE IT OUT D DURING D DRY AIR L LIKE THIS YEAR. BUT IN ORDER TO OPEN THE ACCOUNT THE DEAL WILL NEED THE APPROVE OF ANOTHER MAJOR SUGAR PLAYER. ALL BELOW US AND TO THE RIGHT. FLORIDA CRYSTAL WILL NEED TO AGREE TO A LAND SWAP AND CONCESSIONS MADE R THE SUGAR CANE MILL. REALLY DOES. AND WORKING O N THIS FOR A QUARTER OF A CENTURY YOU FINALLY SEE THAT THIS REALLY IS POSSIBLE. Reporter: AFTER 2 YEARS OF DREAMING OF THE SCENARIO PRACTICE SCENA PRACTICALLY GIDDY WITH THE ARRIVAL. THAT MAKES IT SO TRULY EXCITING NOW I KNOW WHAT TO DO AS AN ENGINEER. A LOT OF THINGS NEED TO HAPPEN FIRST NEXT THE WATER MANAGEMENT GOVERNING BOARD WILL MEET TO DISCUSS THE HISTORY MAKING H PURCHASE. WPBF NEWS 25.

Everglades deal reveals obstacles to restoration

06/28/2008

Bay News 9

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STATE (Bay News 9) -- Details are emerging about the almost \$2-billion Everglades project announced earlier this week by Gov. Charlie Crist, including a growing awareness of obstacles faced by those who will attempt to restore the River of Grass.

While many environmentalists and Floridians think the \$1.7 billion deal Crist reached with U.S. Sugar Corp. is a good deal, many still have concerns about the condition of the 187 acres of the Everglades.

According to Bay News 9's partner paper, the St. Petersburg Times, the conversion of sugar cane and refineries back into marshes full of saw grass, pond apple forests and cypress stands may be tainted by what some call a 'chocolate mess' that exists there. The sugar company routinely pumped fertilizer laden-water off the fields into nearby Lake Okeechobee, contributing to heavy pollution of the lake.

As a result, some officials say they are unsure the flow of the Everglades will ever be restored to the way it once was.

Gov. Crist said he is hopeful that the state's acquisition of U.S. Sugar's land will hasten a revival, and that the Everglades deal will be the largest conservation purchase in Florida's history. 'We continue to make great strides towards the Everglades restoration, by renewing the natural flow of America's River of Grass,' he said. U.S. Sugar Corp. is expected to bear the burden of the pollution. Under the restoration deal, the company will continue to farm the land for six more years before turning it over to the state.

Phil Lewis U.S. Sugar purchase big deal

06/28/2008

Naples Daily News

PHIL LEWIS

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Last Sunday few knew about the agreement between Florida and U.S. Sugar to buy 300 square miles of cane fields and sugar-processing facilities to help save the Everglades. Word started to leak on Monday and by 10:30 a.m. Tuesday the historic agreement had officially been announced and was making headlines from Melbourne (Australia) to St. Petersburg (Russia).

It was a big deal in South Florida and it was a big deal internationally. Perhaps we sometimes forget the respect and awe the Everglades commands around the world.

Gov. Charlie Crist was roundly applauded for brokering the extraordinary deal. Representatives of environmental groups even likened it to the Louisiana Purchase. Then came the questions and criticism that could be expected during an election year. This wasn't about the environment, saving the Everglades or being green as much as it was about Crist wanting to secure the Republican vice-presidential nomination, bloggers claimed. The late-June timing of the announcement raised suspicion. Just the week before, Crist caught flak for supposedly easing his opposition to offshore oil drilling. This was a grandstand play, the critics said, to dampen the drilling criticism and keep alive Crist's chances of being John McCain's running mate this fall.

The problem with that scenario is the fact that \$1.75 billion land deals and the closing of powerful, politically connected corporations like U.S. Sugar do not happen overnight. They don't happen in a week or two, nor in a few months.

That was confirmed shortly after Crist made the official announcement and, we are happy to report, it was a newspaper that got to the bottom of the matter and took us back to where it all began. The St. Petersburg (Florida not Russia) Times did quick, extraordinary reporting that gave valuable behind-the-scene views and added perspective to the blockbuster deal.

The story, published on the newspaper's Web site shortly after the Tuesday announcement, started with this: 'U.S. Sugar Corp. executives were frantic. Environmental groups had sued to stop the company from dumping polluted water in Lake Okeechobee, and a judge agreed it was illegal. Then a state agency voted to forbid the practice. So just before Thanksgiving the company sent two of the most influential lobbyists in Tallahassee, J.M. 'Mac' Stipanovich and Brian Ballard, to meet with Gov. Charlie Crist. If U.S. Sugar couldn't continue dumping farm runoff into the lake, the company would be ruined, they told Crist. 'I have an idea,' Crist replied. 'What if we buy you out? Doesn't that solve everybody's problems?' If all that is true, the deal was not something worked out this spring to help deliver Florida to the Republicans come November and to deliver Crist as the vice-presidential nominee. This had its roots in 2007, when McCain was just one of many candidates vying for the GOP nomination. Remember Mitt Romney?

The St. Pete Times story continued: 'Crist's idea was so wild it took everyone's breath away. But the deal Crist proposed, formally unveiled (this past) Tuesday, is now being hailed as the answer to jump-starting the stalled \$10 billion Everglades restoration project.' The story went on to quote Crist as saying that when he first proposed buying everything U.S. Sugar owns, 'originally there was some surprise' among even his staff. But the more people thought about it, they thought, why not?' The Times also said that according to Crist 'the key to getting the deal started was a federal lawsuit filed by Earthjustice and the Florida Wildlife Federation, challenging the practice of backpumping farm runoff containing phosphorous, pesticides and other chemicals into (Lake Okeechobee).' A federal judge found in favor of the plaintiffs - many are Southwest Florida residents - in late 2006, ruling that the backpumping violates the federal Clean Water Act.

Then last August, a vote was taken by the board of the South Florida Water Management District to end the practice. The water district originally had given the permission to backpump and was the defendant in the lawsuit. The vote was 4-3 to abide by the judge's ruling and the four votes were by new board members appointed by Crist in 2007.

That, according to the St. Pete Times, is what turned U.S. Sugar into a willing seller.

Last August, we wrote an editorial on the 4-3 vote.

It started out: 'Call it the vote heard 'round the lake.' Last week it was heard 'round the world. Phil Lewis is editor of the Daily News. His e-mail address is plewis@naplesnews.com.

Business this week

06/28/2008

The Economist

The Economist

In the largest conservation deal in the state's history, Florida made an offer to pay \$1.75 billion to buy out a sugar producer that operates on 300 square miles (78,000 hectares) of land in the Everglades. The area will eventually be turned over to wetlands restoration.

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Purchasing U.S. Sugar's land will help speed restoration of Everglades

06/29/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Steve Waters - South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The purchase of U.S. Sugar's farmland by Florida is something the state and the federal government should have done back when the idea of restoring the Everglades was first hatched. Give credit to for having the good sense to suggest the deal. Had any of his predecessors pursued the purchase, the Everglades would be in much better shape today and the cost of restoration would have been a lot cheaper.

Everything from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay used to be Everglades. After taking office in 1905, Gov. Napoleon Bonaparte Broward started draining the northern Everglades so crops could be grown in the rich muck. That was the beginning of the problem, as what became known as the Everglades Agricultural Area impeded the flow of water in the River of Grass.

Karl Wickstrom of Florida Sportsman magazine wrote a column several years ago about simplifying Everglades restoration by buying out all the farmers in the EAA. His rationale was that it was worth paying them for their land because restoration would speed up and be more effective by flooding the EAA and letting that water make its way south. Here's hoping that U.S. Sugar's move creates a domino effect and more agricultural land is sold and converted back to marsh.

Even if that doesn't happen, the outdoor recreation possibilities on U.S. Sugar's land are tremendous. Old sugar cane fields flooded with a foot of water will make for great kayaking, canoeing, off-road vehicle riding and bird-watching, not to mention phenomenal duck hunting. I've known anglers who had permission to fish in the irrigation ditches and canals on U.S. Sugar property and they told stories of catching loads of big bass.

Fishing also will be better in Lake Okeechobee. During wet years, to keep the EAA

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dry, the Big O's water level soars, which dirties the lake and destroys vegetation that serves as critical habitat for a variety of species, most notably bass and speckled perch.

When the lake level gets too high, nasty freshwater is dumped in the St. Lucie River and the Caloosahatchee River, and that adversely affects the saltwater estuaries of Stuart and Fort Myers. By releasing excess water from the lake onto U.S. Sugar's 186,000 acres, the lake level can be maintained at an optimal 13 feet and those estuaries will thrive.

Gun ruling The Supreme Court's ruling Thursday that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual's right to keep and bear firearms was good news for target shooters, hunters, collectors and people who own guns for self-defense.

For the first time since the U.S. Constitution was ratified, the court made it clear that every American not just members of a militia has the right to possess a gun. (That right does not apply to convicted felons and the mentally ill.)

At issue was a Washington, D.C., law that banned residents from keeping a handgun in their homes. The Supreme Court ruled the law was unconstitutional. Already lawsuits have been filed challenging gun bans at Chicago and San Francisco.

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Ed Killer Everglades land deal was big surprise

06/29/2008

Jupiter Courier

Ed Killer

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A quick primer for a few live-bait choices frequently used by anglers on the Treasure Coast A great egret stood motionless on the edge of the marsh.

All he cared about was the brunch menu in a swampy cafe. 'Should I have the crayfish or the killifish?' Ten yards away, two common moorhens lazily paddled and clucked in two feet of crystal clear water. A few more yards away, a Florida gar suspended in the warm, sunny water with his snout pointed at the boardwalk. He was probably not hungry, but I'd bet if I tossed a chunk of Vienna sausage his way, he would have snapped it up.

The scene was a typically idyllic summer morning in South Florida. A beautiful Tuesday at the edge of Stormwater Treatment Area 1W, as it's known on the water management district maps.

The critters seemed not to care one iota about the throng of media folks and politicians, conservationists and agri-businessmen, and just plain citizens that gathered at the shoreline of the marsh.

We were there to hear the governor unveil his plan to expedite saving the Everglades. All of us were there to witness history.

And historic it was.

Far fetched? Maybe. Surprising? Definitely. Expensive? Without a doubt.

I have to admit, I never saw it coming.

There had been talk of a 'flow way' most recently by the Rivers Coalition. There had been other discussions through the years that began with 'If only ' and 'What if There had been pledges by other governors. Multi-billion-dollar commitments by Congress

and other federal agencies. More alphabet-driven acronyms for plans and strategies than there are landowners in that area south of Lake Okeechobee and north of the Everglades National Park boundary.

It seemed like acquiring that specific and Rhode Island-sized chunk of land was the best idea possible to fix the Everglades, Florida Bay, Lake Okeechobee, the Caloosahatchee River and of course, the St. Lucie River.

It also seemed like the one option that would never get done. Ever.

I had never even allowed myself to imagine something of this magnitude being attainable.

Why would any entity in the sugar industry ever give up the ability to turn a profit with land they bought when it was ten cents an acre and with the assurance of a market price that would never dip? But there was Gov. Charlie Crist on Tuesday maybe 75 yards from that hungry egret. In a few minutes, he succinctly laid out his plan to acquire what he has billed as 'The Missing Link.' It's a complicated concept that if it comes to pass will most closely return the heart of South Florida's surface water dynamics to its original nature-intended design. It could one day - maybe in time for my children to see it - re-connect a raindrop in Kissimmee with a redfish in Snake Bight.

Following the press conference, I was filled with many more questions than I had as I drove out to Cane Country. But I do hold out hope that one day we will no longer measure Lake Okeechobee's estuary-killing effects on the St. Lucie River.

When all the excitement of making history was finished, I wandered over to check in with my new white-feathered friend, the egret. I asked him which he ended up choosing - the crayfish or the killifish.

As he raised his beak toward the sky and snapped it to adjust the meal he had just speared, I could see it was neither.

Apparently, the amazing news that we all just heard meant little to him.

But he highly recommended the pig frogs at this diner.

Ed Killer can be reached at (772) 221-4201 or edward.killer@scripps.com. Comments are the sole responsibility of the person posting them. We don't allow comments that degrade others on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or disability. Epithets, abusive language and obscene comments will not be tolerated... nor will defamation.

'Is it time to disband the Rivers Coalition?' Leon Abood, chairman of the Treasure Coast environment

06/27/2008

Jupiter Courier

Tyler Treadway

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Tyler Treadway-Stuart News

Coalition to continue lawsuit despite state purchase of U.S. Sugar property

STUART 'Is it time to disband the Rivers Coalition?'

Leon Abood, chairman of the Treasure Coast environmental group, didn't give members much time to answer his rhetorical question at the beginning of Thursday's meeting, the group's first since the state agreed to purchase 187,000 acres, which could drastically cut discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie Estuary.

'No, it's not time,' Abood said.

Rivers Coalition members said there still is work to be done to protect area waterways.

And the coalition won't drop its lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to stop the discharge of billions of gallons of muddy, polluted fresh water that have been linked to fish lesions, toxic algae and a host of other environmental consequences, he said.

'The answer is unequivocally no,' Abood said. 'We're going to keep moving forward.'

This week U.S. Federal Claims Court Judge Lynn Bush agreed to give the two sides until Aug. 8 to finish discovery in the case, with a status report due from them Aug. 18.

Still, members of the coalition of local environmental groups, outdoors enthusiasts and fishing clubs unanimously approved a resolution Thursday supporting the 'statement of principles' in which the South Florida Water Management District will buy about 187,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area from U.S. Sugar Corp. for about \$1.8 billion.

Plans call for the land to be used to develop a 'flow way' to move water from Lake Okeechobee south to the Everglades.

'The Rivers Coalition is in full support of this acquisition,' Abood said, 'providing the land is used for the southern conveyance of water from Lake Okeechobee so that it isn't sent toward the St. Lucie Estuary.'

Paul Gray, a coalition member representing the Audubon Society, called on fellow members 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.

'This acquisition isn't done yet,' Gray said. '(Gov. Charlie Crist, who brokered the land deal) has hooked a big fish, but it's not in the boat yet. We need to help him get it in the boat.'

That's just what Melissa Meeker of Stuart, the Treasure Coast representative on the water district's governing board, said she wanted coalition members to do.

'Don't disband,' Meeker told them. 'We need you out there fighting for this area's needs.'

Staff writer Derek Simmons contributed to this report.

WANNA BUY SOME SWAMPLAND IN FLORIDA? I CAN LET YOU HAVE 187,000 ACRES FOR JUST \$1.8 BILLION

'I know it's a big price tag,' said Paul Gray of the Audubon Society of Martin County, 'but this deal will more than pay for itself in the future in terms of the health of Lake Okeechobee, the health of the Everglades and the health of the St. Lucie Estuary.'

Also, this will assure the future of the water supply for South Florida.'

John Arthur Marshall, president of the West Pam Beach-based Arthur R. Marshall Foundation, said the land purchase will more than pay for itself through energy savings. Pumping water under current plans will cost about \$5 billion over the next 50 years, Marshall said, whereas the proposed flow way will let gravity do the work. 'People who say this purchase is too expensive,' Marshall said, 'aren't thinking long-term enough.'

GREAT CHANCES IN GUYANAS SUGAR

06/28/2008

Guyana Online

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Barring the climate change phenomenon, Guyanas sugar industry is set to go great guns when the Skeldon Sugar Modernisation Project goes into action in August this year. Over the years sugar has always played a dominant role in the countrys economy and at the same time provided employment for a great majority of the Guyanese labour force. It is predicted that when Skeldon gets into top gear, along with the other sugar factories scattered across Berbice and Demerara, Guyana would be in a position to fill extended quotas and even new markets for the commodity. Guyanas sugar has been tried and tested on the world market, and beyond all doubt, it has left an indelible mark on all the markets it has already sweetened. It would seem, however, that at the moment all indicators are pointing to the inadequate supply of sugar cane to the new factory. But the Ministry of Agriculture has put mechanisms in place, and a fair amount of sugar cane for the factory will be supplied by private cane farmers. We note that cane farmers have already signalled their intention of taking up the challenge to supply the new factory with sugar cane. Apart from those with existing lands, land titles have been given to others for the sole purpose of cultivating sugar cane. We acknowledge that like everything else, any new entity is plagued by teething problems, and in this case the inadequate supply of cane, primarily caused by changing weather patterns, is holding back the factory from being tested to full capacity. But it is hoped that when the little nitty gritty is overcome, as Agriculture Minister, Robert Persaud puts it: The New Skeldon Estate will become the jewel of Guyanas sugar industry. Minister Persaud told farmers during a recent visit to the area: In fact 30 percent of the sugar cane will have to come from the private cane farmers so that we can get the 1.1 million tonnes of sugar cane to give us 110,000 tonnes of sugar as part of our plan&but there are slippages there and likewise there are slippages in terms of the overall production across the country. We are aware of the important role of the private cane farmers in the supply of sugar cane to the factory, and support the Minister when he said: We need to recognise that there are some difficulties that we are facing and we need everyone to be on board and everyone to support us in this regard. Whatever it takes, we have to take up the challenges. We note with interest that only a few days ago, the State of Florida paid the US Sugar Corporation, the nations largest producer of cane sugar some US\$1.75B for 300 square miles of the Florida Everglades for restoration purposes. Under the deal the US Sugar Corporation would be allowed to continue its operations on 187,000 acres for another six years when all operations are expected to close. We believe this sends a good signal for us and at the same time putting us on the alert to cash in on the eventual US sugar market. But we cannot afford to be complacent. We have to start rising to this major challenge for the benefit of the entire nation At the moment our sugar production indicators are encouraging. A look at the production figures for the past six years shows:

2002 331,068 tonnes
2003 302,378 tonnes.
2004 325,317 tonnes.
2005 246,092 tonnes.
2006 259,550 tonnes.

2007 266,482 tonnes.

The projected figure for this year is set at 285,000 tonnes. Like rice, we are doing well in sugar and it is hoped that when the New Skeldon Sugar Factory comes on stream, the countrys sugar production figures would be even bigger, putting us in the enviable position of meeting our quotas in excess and satisfying local demands at the same time.

No way to sugarcoat Glades anger

06/29/2008

Palm Beach Post

Schultz, Randy

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By Randy Schultz-Palm Beach Post

In Florida's sugar cane country, where residents regard the populated coast with suspicion and resentment, they care about even the symbolic details.

About 25 years ago, a delegation from The Post went out to Belle Glade to sit through what amounted to a daylong lecture about the paper's coverage of the sugar industry. As usual, the industry people said, we didn't understand what they do. As usual, though, it was a G-rated lecture, on substance rather than style. First names only. As usual, we broke for a tasty lunch that included luscious Glades-area produce.

As we ate, I noticed the semi-portly director of the Florida Sugar Cane League fiddling with something under the edge of the table. He was trying to open a can of diet soda - flavored, obviously, with non-sugar - and pour the contents into a glass without us seeing. It was like watching the National Cattlemen's Beef Association lobbyist trying to sneak a turkey burger.

It's about 40 miles on State Road 80 from the ocean to Belle Glade. For almost the last 20 miles of the trip, you see nothing but sugar cane fields. As you drive farther west to Clewiston and LaBelle in Hendry County, West Palm Beach, Boca Raton and Port St. Lucie might as well be in Georgia. The Glades-area people are proud of their farms, defensive about the idea that farming harms the Everglades and long have fully trusted no one but their neighbors.

Until now.

Feeling of betrayal in Clewiston

When U.S. Sugar said last week that the company had agreed to be bought out by the state, many in the company's hometown of Clewiston and all along the rim towns of Lake Okeechobee felt betrayed. Imagine University of Florida football coach Urban Meyer replacing Bobby Bowden at Florida State.

For decades, people in Clewiston - halfway between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico - have counted on the stability that comes from U.S. Sugar's 2,000-plus jobs. The nicest place to eat in the Glades was the Clewiston Inn, which U.S. Sugar owned until last summer. Clewiston's library is impressive for a town of about 7,000, in part because of donations from U.S. Sugar. People vote at the John Boy Auditorium, named after a former U.S. Sugar president. Businesses in and around Clewiston stay healthy because U.S. Sugar is a customer.

And whenever The Palm Beach Post or those dang environmentalists have gone on about how farming still pollutes the Everglades, U.S. Sugar has responded. Because of the 1994 Everglades Forever Act, the company notes regularly, water going into the "River of Grass" never has been cleaner. Of course, it still isn't clean enough to make the Everglades healthy, but the company was making its point.

Yet there on Tuesday was U.S. Sugar CEO Bob Buker with Gov. Crist, to announce that the state - the state! - wants to buy the company. U.S. Sugar would farm its nearly 200,000 acres for six more years, and then disappear, taking all those jobs with it.

Cold-eyed business decision

For those of us who remember the defiant, community-minded U.S. Sugar, the news is stunning. So the question is: Why would the company sell, with the price of sugar high and with the industry having got what it wanted from Congress in the recent farm bill?

Throw out the idea, articulated at Tuesday's news conference, that U.S. Sugar wants to leave something big for Florida's environment. Not until 1994 did the state's cane growers accept the idea of paying to clean up the Everglades. More likely, this was a cold-eyed business decision tied to new politics.

Under Jeb Bush, the sugar industry had its usual clout. Mr. Bush even put a U.S. Sugar vice president on the board of the South Florida Water Management District, which is the proposed buyer of U.S. Sugar. But under Gov. Crist, the industry has lost influence, and there is no sign of that changing.

Also this year, former employees sued U.S. Sugar, claiming that the company had shorted them on retirement benefits tied to company stock. Based on the allegations, U.S. Sugar had become a less paternalistic company. If the sale goes through, the employees may get what they want, and the lawsuit will go away. The high per-share price also would benefit the company's key shareholders.

In "America's Sweetest Town," however, there is resentment. Only this time, it's not directed at the coast.

Randy Schultz is the editor of the editorial page of The Palm Beach Post. His e-mail address is schultz@pbpost.com

U.S. Sugar buy would boost Everglades plan

06/29/2008

Charlotte Sun Herald

Charlotte Sun Herald

OUR POSITION: Proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar Corp. property in Everglades Agricultural Area breathes new life into restoration effort.

Gov. Charlie Crist last week announced a landmark land acquisition deal that dwarfs the state's 2006 purchase of Babcock Ranch. While many details still must be negotiated, the deal would put 187,000 acres of farmland in the Everglades Agricultural Area under state ownership and unwind the operations of 77-year-old U. S. Sugar Corp., one of two sugar producers operating in the EAA.

The \$1.75 million proposal has far-reaching implications for the \$12 billion federal and state Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and is a victory for clean water advocates on both coasts who oppose the seasonal dumping of Lake Okeechobee water into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers. Lee County officials, who had been sparring with the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District over nutrient-rich releases into the Caloosahatchee River, were overjoyed by the announcement. The releases were blamed for befouling wide swaths of the Gulf of Mexico and producing brown flows that represented a tourism nightmare for the county.

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The deal would be funded by the state and property taxes collected by the South Florida Water Management District, which includes a small portion of southern Charlotte County. The price tag, about \$9,400 per acre, is nearly double what the state and Lee County paid for 72,000 acres of Babcock Ranch in 2006, which may reflect the cash flow generated by U.S. Sugar's farming and processing operations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that U.S. Sugar and other operations produced \$446 million worth of sugar last year. U.S. Sugar will continue to operate for six years under the terms of the agreement.

According to the governor's office, the proposal would provide a heretofore unavailable drainage and filtering system for water released from Lake Okeechobee. While the price tag represents a 15-percent chunk of the larger restoration effort it also removes the need to mitigate the impact of thousands of tons of phosphorus that are swept into the Everglades off U.S. Sugar land.

The acquisition will require a re-evaluation of Everglades restoration efforts because till now keeping phosphate-tainted water out of the River of Grass had called for the drilling of more than 300 deep-injection wells and the construction of thousands of acres of water storage systems. Historically, water flowed south from the Orlando area through an un-diked Lake Okeechobee, through the 11,000 square-mile Everglades and into Florida Bay. The Everglades is now only half that size, but the nearly 300 square miles involved in the U.S. Sugar deal represents a huge leap in restoration prospects.

Last Monday's announcement of the deal, which will take at least four more months to negotiate, was timed to kick off Crist's second Serve to Preserve climate change summit in Miami. The next day, the governor was on hand to witness the next incremental step in FP&L's previously announced plan to build the largest photovoltaic solar power plant in the world in DeSoto County.

It remains to be seen how U.S. Sugar's departure from the industry will affect U.S. sugar policy, which involves import quotas and billions of dollars in loan guarantees that effectively serve as price supports, keeping the cost of sugar to U.S. food, candy and beverage producers artificially high. The operations of Florida Crystal, the other major sugar producer farming within the 500,000-acre EAA, are not directly effected by the deal, nor was there any indication a similar future deal with the privately held company was in the works.

The Everglades, long abused by state, federal and private practices, has a new outlook today. We look forward to the completion of the deal and congratulate its architects.

We think: Crist needs strong follow-through on Everglades blockbuster

06/29/2008

Orlando Sentinel

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Orlando Sentinel

With apologies to Thomas Jefferson, the government that governs best doesn't always govern least.

Rejuvenating the anemic but badly needed restoration of the Everglades wasn't going to happen by tweaking it. Getting it moving again required a grand governmental move, and Gov. Charlie Crist provided it. His offer to buy out chief River of Grass polluter U.S. Sugar, while its lobbyists complained to him about the state's recent refusal to allow the company to further pollute Lake Okeechobee, could well accomplish what eight years of government futility hasn't.

Since Congress in 2000 authorized the restoration, officials haven't ponied up. Their delay has added billions of dollars to the project's cost. But when the company agreed in principle last week to sell the state its 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee for \$1.75 billion, the landscape changed. Much of the property U.S. Sugar would sell to the state can be turned into reservoirs, which could be used for drought control, and artificial marshes, which can filter the pollutants now poisoning the Glades. It can be used to help restore the flow to the Everglades that growth and efforts at flood control long ago choked off.

A new, more direct pathway south that the land purchase would allow also could reduce the restoration's cost, erasing earlier plans for drilling hundreds of pricey wells for storing fresh water.

And it could revive the Everglades' magnificent wildlife habitat, returning it to the haven it once was for, among others, millions of wading birds.

The buyout of U.S. Sugar can do all these things, if Mr. Crist also now does what doesn't come particularly easily to him: following through.

The governor likes making big pitches. Property insurance rates will nose-dive, remember? But a governor also needs to show skill as a closer.

We're still waiting on reasonable insurance rates.

Mr. Crist simply needs to pound, and at times finesse, the deal through. If appraisals on the land don't support the offer, make another. A harsh market and toughening regulations have made U.S. Sugar an eager seller.

The governor, a former attorney general, needs to use his skills as a negotiator to get U.S. Sugar-competitor Florida Crystals to trade some of its land to the state, which it needs to complete the path replenishing the Everglades.

And he needs to drum up more money to finish the restoration. The \$1.75 billion just buys U.S. Sugar's land. It doesn't dig a single reservoir. He might not find a better time than now to get Congress to honor its 50-50 funding commitment. It won't happen if he doesn't keep at it.

Bob Buker

06/29/2008

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Palm Beach Post

Who he is: Chief executive officer of U.S. Sugar Corp., based in Clewiston.

The difference he made: He and the U.S. Sugar board said "Yes."

At a meeting in November with lobbyists for U.S. Sugar, Gov. Crist reportedly asked, "Why don't we just buy you out?" The sugar lobbyists had been trying to get Gov. Crist to let them pump polluted water into Lake Okeechobee. Rather than haggle over each of the many environmental issues concerning farming, Gov. Crist popped the big question. The idea had been floated before. But this time, Mr. Buker said "Yes."

The result: Uproar, favorable and otherwise. Environmentalists who for years had seen U.S. Sugar as the enemy suddenly saw it as a potential partner. But people who live in Clewiston and the surrounding area were sick about losing about 2,000 jobs.

Will the complicated deal go through? If it does, will it finally heal the Everglades? Either way, the discussion about how to heal the Everglades has changed forever.

Environmentalists sue to overturn EPA water rule

06/27/2008

FindLaw: Legal News and Commentary

FindLaw: Legal News and Commentary

WASHINGTON (AP) - A Florida environmental group sued the Bush administration Friday over a recent decision to allow water to be transferred without a permit.

Water is routinely moved from reservoirs, rivers and lakes into other waterways for drinking, irrigation and other uses. While the discharge of pollutants into water from a pipe or other 'point source' needs a permit under the Clean Water Act, the Environmental Protection Agency on June 9 said the requirement would no longer apply to water transfers, even though the water could contain contaminants.

The Florida Wildlife Federation, which filed the suit in U.S. Circuit Court in Atlanta, argues that the decision will allow contaminated water to enter pristine waters.

'We are seeking to invalidate the rule. This will have terrible consequences all over the United States,' said David Guest, director of the Florida office for Earthjustice, which is representing the federation in the case.

In 2002, the group successfully sued the South Florida Water Management District and EPA to require a permit for pumping water from irrigation ditches into Lake Okeechobee. Before the EPA's ruling, the agency generally did not issue permits for water transfers.

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Troubled yard gets makeover in Naples

06/29/2008

News-Press

ANDREA STETSON

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Andrea Stetson-News-Press

Like the TV show "Extreme Makeover Home Edition," Xtreme Yard Makeover brought together volunteers from more than 35 organizations who descended on the lawn of a Naples home to tear it up and put together a water-efficient, drought-tolerant landscape. For six weeks they worked to take a landscaped challenged yard and turned it into a Florida friendly one.

On Saturday the Xtreme Yard Makeover was unveiled to the public. "When we went to our current water restrictions the question that kept coming up was how can we have a beautiful yard and still conserve water. We thought the best way to do it was to show them," said Judy Haner, spokeswoman from South Florida Water Management District's Big Cypress Basin. "We thought, 'why don't we just pick out a yard and show people what they can do to conserve water in a yard.'" That's exactly what they did. They found a yard riddled with problems from dying grass and greenery that needed more water, to trees close to power lines.

Volunteers from irrigation companies, nurseries and landscape companies put together a yard that features drought-tolerant empire grass and more than 200 native plants such as dune daisies, wild coffee, fire bush, penta, red coco plum and fiddlewood. "Fiddlewood is a little-known plant and it's native and it's beautiful," Haner said. The empire turf uses one-third less water and one-fifth less fertilizer than regular grass, said John Kiefer of the Sustainable Landscape Council.

Under the turf, a drip irrigation system was installed that waters plants from beneath the soil, cutting down on evaporation, water lost from wind and even weeds.

A rain sensor with a meter was installed to regulate the amount of water based on the plant's need. Kevin O'Brien of Hunter Industries said the meter costs about \$850 plus installation, much more than the normal \$200 for a regular meter, but in the long run saves money.

State Sen. Burt Saunders came to view the yard makeover during its debut Saturday. He said he'd like to do this to his own lawn at his Naples home. "We're now beyond the age of cheap energy and cheap water and we all have to conserve with everything we do," Saunders said. "This saves a tremendous amount of water, but it's still very attractive." South Florida Water Management District board member Charles Dauray said it would be great if other homeowners did the same. "This property, used properly, will save 75,000 gallons of water a year," Dauray said. "If everybody say in Lee County did this, imagine how much water we would save." Daphne Vosey was lucky recipient of the Xtreme Yard Makeover. "I was surprised and shocked when they told me, and I said, 'OK, what's the catch?'" "There was no catch. Haney said Vosey's yard was chosen because it was in a high visibility area on Trail Boulevard parallel to Tamiami Trail, and because it was a typical landscaped-challenged lawn that could benefit from a yard makeover.

Standing in her finished yard, Vosey, who has lived there since 1986, was amazed at the results. "We didn't expect it to be on this large of a scale," she said. "It's just phenomenal."

The Green Girl My bucket list Recycle rain water

06/28/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Kristi Martin Moyer

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Kristi Martin Moyer-Palm Beach Post

You'd never know it with our recent multiyear drought, but West Palm Beach is one of the rainiest cities in the U.S. According to some charts, it's the nation's fourth-rainiest city, with an impressive 52 to 53 inches of average rainfall annually.

Yet, according to the South Florida Water Management District, that's still not nearly enough for our thirsty yards, since irrigation accounts for up to 50 percent of our household water use. Here's a thought: why not save that rain water and redistribute it when your plants need it? All you need is a rain barrel, which can be attached to a hose or emptied into a watering can.

The potential savings are mind-boggling.

An inch of rainfall on a 1,000 square foot roof yields 623 gallons of water. If you managed to save all the water falling on your average, 2,400 square-foot house each year, you'd harvest 75,000 gallons!

You can buy a 55-gallon rain barrel from West Palm Beach-based Biobarrels.com (561 308-8585) for \$80, but making your own is easy and inexpensive. See directions at www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/conservation/rainbarrel.

For the more committed, Rain Drops Cisterns and Water Storage in the Tampa Bay area has modernized the ancient rain barrel. Priced from about \$500 to \$1,400, these tanks will hold 130 to 620 gallons. The water captured can be used for irrigation, swimming pools and ponds, car washing, and can even be connected directly to your plumbing. Yes, you could flush your toilets and even shower with water collected from your roof. (But you can't drink it.) Now that water restrictions are likely to be a permanent part of our lives, perhaps it's time to learn to save not for a rainy day, but the rainy day itself.

Pine Jog does not endorse the products or companies listed. References are for information only.

Supplemented by staff members of Pine Jog Environmental Education Center, West Palm Beach, in association with Florida Atlantic University. For more information, go to www.pinejog.fau.edu.

Do It Yourself: Rain barrels making a return

06/29/2008

Naples Daily News

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Naples Daily News

The childrens' art made this colorful rain barrel in the yard of Mary Jaron Kelley and Charles Kelley of Northeast Portland, Wash., part of the appeal of the home. It was featured on a tour of natural gardens and good conservation practices last year.

Rain barrels were a staple of the pragmatic household in centuries past; in Southwest Florida, where droughts have become more menacing each spring, they could return to that status. Several models will show up this morning at the X-treme Yard Makeover open house, where attendees can learn just how handy rain barrels are and how to get their own.

Full rain barrels can handle houseplant watering needs, drip irrigations, even tool cleanup or car washdown during Florida's arid winters. Although we have all the water we need in June, in bone-dry December, they can be a godsend. A quarter-inch rain can fill a 55-gallon barrel.

For those who can't visit the open house today, a check of the Internet shows new interest in producing them in areas of the U.S. where rain has been nil; there are decorating competitions and utility-department instruction manuals. In fact, there are dozens of plans available on the Internet. Each appeals to a different kind of logic.

A good start is with the South Florida Water Management District, which offers an overview of the process for building a rain barrel, except for the overflow spout:

www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/conservation/rainbarrel.

Here are a few principles to remember:

Only use a food-grade 55-gallon plastic barrel with a tight lid. Finding one is easier said than done. Although area car washes receive their chemicals in 55-gallon plastic drums and generally offer them at low or no cost, they're in demand for everything from barrel racing to bait holding and you may be on a waiting list. If you can, sign up for a barrel kit at the open house today.

Set the barrel on a platform high enough for you to comfortably tap the spigot for water or connect a hose. The rain barrels at the X-treme Yard Makeover home are held in a clever hip-height wooden stand that John Kiefer of E3 Design Group in Bonita Springs has made for 4-H students to produce.

Make sure there's an overflow drainspout that empties onto a splash guard or a surface that carries it away from the house.

Apply the paint or let your favorite artists "muralize" it after the barrel is finished unless you don't mind scratches. Reported best paints for plastic: Krylon Fusion for Plastic.

Two detailed project plans that make simple sense included one from a University of Florida Extension Service agent in Sarasota, and another by a writer whose DIY husband we just have to love — André "Dangerous with Tools" Guirard:

sarasota.extension.ufl.edu/Hort/Pubs/Rainbarrel.shtml

home.comcast.net/~leavesdance/rainbarrels/construction.html

Despite amateur illustrations and the idea that anyone should polish a rain barrel with vegetable oil — which the neighborhood cats here would spend all day licking off — this set of instructions was also good:

www.naturalrainwater.com/make_rainbarrel.htm

Consider connecting two barrels if you have the room and a bountiful rain runoff spot. How to do it? See this:

www.rainbarrel.net/connect.html

If you're not able to make your own barrel, many companies sell them in styles from plain and plastic to Grecian urn styles.

There are flat-backed barrels that snuggle up against the house, tall rectangular barrels, terra cotta or stone-look barrels and even a deep green, decorative blocky one with a planter on top. Prices range from \$69.95 to \$248. The neighbors will never know it's there.

www.rainbarrelsource.com

www.exterior-accents.com/flrabag.html

www.gardeners.com/Rain-Barrels/

For decor diehards, there are copper "rain chains" that can carry the rain from the gutter to the barrel in style:

www.midwestinternetsales.com/rainbarrels.htm

Reward, don't punish, water savers in Manalapan

06/28/2008

Palm Beach Daily News

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The Manalapan Town Commission has lent proof to the adage that no good deed goes unpunished. And that's something municipalities need to change.

The cycle began with the imposition of water restrictions by the South Florida Water Management District. Manalapan residents complied. As a result, water revenues dropped, leaving an approximate \$377,000 gap between projected and received earnings. As a result, residents who made a good faith effort to comply with the restrictions will be hit with a water rate increase starting July 1. For a residential customer paying \$24.93 today, his bill will rise July 1 to \$33.66, a 35 percent increase. That's because the monthly usage charge will rise from \$1.75 per 1,000 gallons to \$1.85 per 1,000 gallons, a 5.7 percent increase.

It is true that this a pattern for municipalities throughout the region. And Manalapan, like most of the others, offers no rewards for its citizens' responsible behavior.

Political pulse

06/28/2008

Orlando Sentinel

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DAVID DAMRON-Orlando Sentinel

OrlandoSentinel.com/politicalpulse

Lawsuit to tap lake 'ridiculous,' says foe

An environmental group has lined up against Orange County in its lawsuit to tap into sensitive lakes in the Kissimmee River basin, and a Realtors group also has blasted county leaders for waging the fight.

Charles Lee, Audubon of Florida advocacy director, said he is upset over the lawsuit the county filed against the South Florida Water Management District after the state agency turned down Orange's request to pull 7 million gallons a day from lakes Hart and Mary Jane.

Audubon argues that Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty is waging a costly legal fight to tap lakes that are crucial to a Kissimmee River restoration effort, when the county should focus on conservation efforts. Crotty and most commissioners say the agency told them to look at surface waters for future water needs, and that's exactly what they're doing.

Lydia Pisano of the Orlando Regional Realtors Association said the county is making a mistake by trying to draw from those lakes, in part for future irrigation needs. Pisano said her group recently passed a unanimous resolution saying the suit is a waste of money and that drawing water from the lakes could hurt property values. "It's just ridiculous," Pisano said.

DAVID DAMRON

Aqueduct has two-pronged approach for addressing consumption

06/29/2008

Key West Citizen

Gibbs, Steve

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BY STEVE GIBBS -Citizen Staff

With drought conditions and water-use restrictions now part of the South Florida fabric, the local water utility is working to conserve the Florida Keys' water supply in the well fields as well as in backyards.

Recently, the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority renewed its 20-year Consumptive Water Use Permit with the South Florida Water Management District. FKAA's daily allocation of fresh water was capped at 17.63 million gallons.

That water is piped to the Keys from the Biscayne Aquifer and, to a very limited degree, the more brackish Floridan Aquifer; both are backed up by drought-depleted Lake Okeechobee.

Because of the extended drought and increased consumption, FKAA began construction of a \$40 million desalination plant at the 60-acre Robert Dean facility in Florida City last year that is due for completion by next summer.

"That will provide us a maximum of 6 million gallons a day over and above what we are allowed to withdraw from the Biscayne Aquifer," said Colleen Tagle, spokeswoman for FKAA. "Because it requires such high energy to operate, the RO plant will only kick in at high peak times such as the July Fourth weekend and during the Christmas season."

FKAA officials detailed their efforts during last week's real estate symposium at the Elks Lodge.

On the home front, FKAA is encouraging water conservation in the form of low-flow toilets and rainwater-collecting cisterns.

"We have applied for a grant for a cistern assistance program in partnership with the South Florida Water Management District," Tagle said. "The idea is that each resident who wishes to convert his septic tank to a cistern after it is decommissioned can receive up to \$500 for a septic tank conversion. Of course, such essentials as rain gutters must be in place first."

As a mandated central sewer system is slowly put into place Keyswide, residents must disconnect from backyard septic systems that have been the standard for many years. Some have converted those concrete tanks to underground cisterns for lawn and plant watering.

Tagle said grants are also available for retrofitting homes with low-flow toilets in order to encourage water conservation.

The Keys have been under varying water-use restrictions in recent years.

On April 18, the water management district revised restrictions to allow residential landscape irrigation two days a week and relaxed guidelines for other outdoor use such as washing vehicles.

'Taste it, don't waste it' is the new Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority's slogan.

The water utility backs that up with a few tips on how to conserve water:

Turn off water while shaving, brushing teeth and washing hands;

Install low-flow fixtures;

Keep a cold bottle of tap water in the refrigerator for drinking;

Fix leaks;

Take a 'Navy' shower (no more than 5 minutes).

sgibbs@keysnews.com

LAKE OKEECHOBEE HAS BEEN SUFFERING THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS.

06/27/2008

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE LAKES. LAKE OKEECHOBEE HAS BEEN SUFFERING THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS. NOW WE ARE STARTING TO SEE THE LEVELS COME UP. THERE'S STILL ABOUT THREE FEET BELOW THE HISTORICAL AVERAGE. AT 9.4. WE HAD A THE LOT OF RAIN IN JUNE. NOT ENOUGH TO GET US WHERE WE NEED TO BE. LET'S HOPE WE CONTINUE TO GET RAIN DURING THE RAINY SEASON AND CONDITIONS THERE IMPROVE. THAT WILL KEEP US OUT OF STRICTER WATER RESTRICTIONS.

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Sanctuary programs feel budget squeeze

06/29/2008

Key West Citizen

O'Hara, Timothy

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Today's agency funding at the same level it was eight years ago

BY TIMOTHY O'HARA - Citizen Staff

Federal budget cuts could halt programs that give local fishermen and boaters weather and tide information, maintain mooring balls for diving and fishing boats, and keep the Florida Keys Eco-Discovery Center in Key West open longer.

Despite increases in fuel and operating expenses over the years, the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary is operating at the same funding level it had in 2001.

After enjoying a 70 percent budget increase, from \$1.4 million in 1992 to \$2.5 million in 1999, the agency's funding has increased only 29 percent from 2000 to 2007, from \$3.4 million to \$4.9 million.

Aside from a few high years — it peaked at \$6.3 million in 2004 — the budget has been on a steady decline every year since, dropping to \$6.2 million in 2005, \$5.2 million in 2006, \$4.9 million in 2007 and \$4.7 million this year, sanctuary records show.

A partnership the sanctuary has with the Florida Institute of Oceanography to service six buoys that collect meteorological and oceanographic information is in jeopardy, Sanctuary Superintendent Dave Score said. The program has been in effect since the early 1990s.

The cuts also could affect the maintenance of mooring buoys, where boats can tie up to avoid using anchors on the fragile reef. Buoy maintenance crews are normally out on the water four days a week. Score is assessing the most cost-effective way to maintain them, he said.

"We are trying to maintain the same level of service with less money. Something has to give, especially with gas at more than \$4 a gallon," said Score, who said 12 percent of the sanctuary's budget is for fuel. "Costs have escalated. Fuel is almost twice as much than in previous years."

The sanctuary has a fleet of boats that includes a high-speed law enforcement catamaran, two large buoy maintenance vessels and several midrange research vessels.

Sanctuary officials wanted the Eco-Discovery Center at the Truman Waterfront in Key West to be open seven days a week, but funding limitations have kept it to five days a week. The center has one paid staff member and relies on interns and volunteers to take up the slack, Score said.

To help fund coral and seagrass monitoring programs, the sanctuary has had to rely more on grants from other environmental government agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District, Score said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service refuges in the Keys have managed to escape the wrath of federal bean counters. The operation and maintenance funds for the Florida Keys' National Wildlife Refuges comprising Key Deer in Big Pine Key, Great White Heron

in the Lower Keys and Crocodile Lake in Key Largo have fared better. The budget went from \$1.14 million in 2006 to \$1.13 in 2007 to \$1.64 million this year, according to Anne Morkill, refuges manager.

The service eliminated 88 jobs nationwide and reallocated the savings to the refuges for specific projects and fixed-operating expenses such as fuel and utilities. However, those increases were based on operating expenses and costs that were set at 2006 levels, when gas prices were almost half what they are now.

Federal money for refuges that were damaged in the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons will fund a new wildlife biologist and park ranger, Morkill said. The refuges also received money to rebuild an administrative office, which cost \$3.2 million; and to rebuild two other buildings and replace refuge buoys, which cost \$1.78 million, Morkill said.

The Florida Keys marine sanctuary is not the only agency funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that is feeling the pinch. NOAA, which funds research around the country, has scrapped at least four research trips nationwide and is shortening others "because of the increase in petroleum prices," chief spokesman Anson Franklin said Wednesday.

"We're trying to determine whether we can move some resources around to keep some missions going," Franklin said, adding that NOAA last week worked to hammer out a budget, taking into account the rising cost of fuel for the fleet.

In a June 10 e-mail to NOAA field offices and others, NOAA warned of an "approximate" \$1.7 million budget shortfall due to fuel costs, and noted the agency has proposed cutting 231 ocean research days for the year.

"I only dread to look ahead to 2009 if we do not get funding relief for fuel and marine operations," read the e-mail sent by John Oliver, a NOAA deputy assistant administrator.

Franklin confirmed the e-mail's authenticity but noted that the figures are preliminary.

"The research that we do is some of the most important operations, so we're going to try to keep as many of them on course as we can," Franklin said. He said some canceled trips may be reinstated but others could be cut.

NOAA dropped at least two research trips — a Gulf of Mexico marine mammal cruise and one on fish larvae adrift in ocean currents — for a total loss of about 95 days at sea, said James Bohnsack, a NOAA fisheries biologist in Miami. Bohnsack noted the studies were set to look at the effects of hurricanes, disease, algae blooms and even climate change on the mammals and larvae.

"These are critical to us," Bohnsack said. "We won't have any information at all this year on them."

Two other trips have been canceled in Alaska: a salmon survey in the Bering Sea and a North Pacific marine ecosystem study.

NOAA had canceled Monday's research trip off the Northeast coast to study the effects of climate change and other factors on clams from Delaware to Canada. The region produces the clams most commonly found in mass-produced foods such as canned soups and sauces, a \$60 million a year industry. But the agency reinstated that voyage after The Associated Press inquired about the cutbacks.

The Florida Keys sanctuary has not canceled any trips, but it has changed its policy on supporting outside researchers with its boats. The sanctuary now requests researchers reimburse the sanctuary for fuel costs. The shift in policy "hurts some of the smaller, but still important, projects," Score said.

Information from The Associated Press contributed to this report.

tohara@keysnews.com

Technological innovations ease concerns

06/29/2008

Sun-Sentinel

Guy, Kingsley

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Kingsley Guy - South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Charlie Crist says Florida should consider oil drilling off its coast.

Oh, no. What next? Drilling in the Big Cypress National Preserve?

The fact is, 19 oil wells in Big Cypress have been pumping black gold since the early 1970s. I visited a site a number of years ago as part of a helicopter tour of South Florida sponsored by the Water Management District.

The environmental impact of the drilling has been minimal at worst. In fact, one of the workers told me a Florida panther would wander by at times and make itself at home near one of the pumps.

But drilling off the coast is different, you say. An oil spill could foul the state's beaches, devastate wildlife and damage the tourist industry upon which the state's economy depends. That's a valid concern, but one that needs to be kept in perspective. The Santa Barbara oil spill had a severe economic and ecological impact on parts of California. But that was in 1969, and the well was only six miles offshore. Nobody's talking about placing wells anywhere near that close to Florida's coastline.

Just as telecommunications technology has advanced mightily in the last four decades, so has drilling technology. Hurricane Katrina proved that. The storm that brought devastation to New Orleans also wrought havoc on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico, yet there weren't any spills. Directional drilling has been one of the greatest technological advances. This enables oil companies to drill at different angles, allowing the concentration of wellheads at a central point and at a significant distance from the source.

And here's something you won't hear from an environmentalist dead set against drilling: The oil platforms serve as superb artificial reefs. Ask a sports fisherman, and he'll tell you that some of the best fishing grounds in the Gulf of Mexico are located near the rigs.

The environmentally conscious Norwegians are drilling off their coast, as are the Dutch and the Brazilians. Indeed, just about every country with a coastline is eager to find offshore oil, except the United States.

Drilling opponents point out that current leases in the Gulf have yet to be tapped, and they are correct. But the economics of drilling are changing as the price of oil and natural gas goes up. What doesn't make sense at \$50 for a barrel of oil might make sense at \$100-plus.

The opponents also claim that new coastal drilling won't bring down the price of oil for years. Again they are correct. In fact, given the growth in demand from China and India, it may never bring down the price. But new domestic sources eventually will lessen America's dependence on foreign oil and help to reduce the nation's trade imbalance.

A lot of drilling opponents seem to be operating under the "magic wand" theory of energy. Wave a magic wand, and technological advances will enable us to do away

with oil as a fuel.

I hate to break this to them, but magic wands only exist in fairy tales. High oil prices will spur technological innovation, and eventually the country could move completely away from oil as a fuel. But that will take decades, not months or years.

The United States must develop alternatives to fossil fuels, but it also must face reality — and that means finding new domestic sources of supply for oil and natural gas as well.

Commentary by retired Editorial Page Editor Kingsley Guy appears on alternate weeks. Readers may e-mail him at harborlite3@bellsouth.net.

Florida, Holland unite on water, land challenges

06/29/2008

Bradenton Herald

David Klement - Bradenton Herald

DELFT, The Netherlands

Flip-flops and wooden shoes seem a perfect metaphor for the differences between Florida and Holland. Flip-flops symbolize the laid-back, transient culture of Florida and wooden shoes the stolid, no-nonsense culture of the Dutch.

Yet they are about to become partners in a unique technology exchange that offers the promise of cost-effective management of water and land-use challenges - a partnership that could become a model for international cooperation on climate-change issues designed to be replicated by the United Nations for application around the globe.

Though far apart in climate, language and culture, Florida and Holland have a great deal in common. Each has vast stretches of low-lying seashore vulnerable to Mother Nature's whims. Each has huge populations living close to those vulnerable shores. Each worries about adequate fresh water resources to sustain its cities and farms. Each has erred in managing its water resources in the past - draining, dredging, damming and polluting as if water were a friend of limitless forgiveness.

The shared concerns are the basis of a blossoming relationship between the two governments, called the Florida-Holland Connection. Gov. Charlie Crist is expected to formalize that relationship in July when he signs an agreement with the Dutch consulate to share information on water and land-use issues.

Actually, the partnership is already operating unofficially, with teams from each country making trips to study the management practices of the other. A 14-member class from the UNESCO Institute for Water Education (IHE), based in Delft, Holland, last week completed a two-week visit hosted by the Patel Center for Global Solutions at the University of South Florida and the Interagency Modeling Center at the South Florida Water Management District.

In April, a 16-member delegation of Florida engineers, attorneys, academics and private citizens attended a five-day water course at UNESCO IHE in Delft, a visit organized by the Florida Earth Foundation of West Palm Beach.

The five days were crammed with presentations by Dutch academics and engineers on the strategies and expertise the Dutch have developed for dealing with natural events that are every bit as catastrophic as Florida's hurricanes. The week also included field trips to some of Holland's most impressive hydraulic projects, including the massive Maeslant storm surge barrier on the Rhine downriver from Rotterdam and the equally

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mind-boggling Oosterschelde storm surge barrier to the south. The enormity of those public works projects - the Dutch claim the Maeslant barrier is the largest movable structure on earth - had most of the Florida delegates shaking their heads in disbelief. From the country whose ingenuity and commitment put humans on the moon almost 40 years ago, that awe-struck reaction is particularly relevant.

Dutch facing challenge

For the overwhelming message of the course was not just the Dutch technical skills in water management, impressive as they are. Rather it was the awareness of the Dutch chutzpah in facing up to the challenges of their unique environment - the sheer audacity of the nation not only to contain an ocean now but to look ahead 100 years in anticipation of what climate change will mean to its 16 million citizens - and to be ready to deal with it. As the United States wallows in denial of global warming, Holland is actively preparing for weather aberrations that will produce catastrophic flooding and sea level rises to threaten low-lying cities. This will be true not just for Rotterdam or Amsterdam but for the pristine, tourist-magnet beaches of Florida. The warming of our earth is indeed global, respecting no boundaries.

And this important insight: As the United States finds itself mired in shaky economic times, if not outright recession, Holland basks in prosperity, and its industries boldly plan to capitalize on the opportunities presented by global warming and sea level rise. From a four-square-mile expansion into the North Sea of the Port of Rotterdam - already the busiest in the world - to research into "smart soils" for dike-building and pinpoint weather forecasting, the Dutch are marching boldly into the scary new world of glacial meltdowns, flooding and droughts that a warming planet will produce - not just to protect their people but because they see economic benefits in doing so. There is, in this partnership, not just an exchange of expertise in restoring a wetland or preventing a storm surge but also the prospect of creating jobs and business opportunities as international companies take notice of Florida's pro-active response to climate change, including Crist's aggressive "green" initiative.

The most striking observation was the fact that Aug. 29, 2005, appears to have more significance to the Dutch than to the United States. That's the day that Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Katrina served as a wake-up call for the Dutch, while the U.S. hit the snooze button.

Aggressive on flooding

Since 1953, Dutch officials have been aggressive in protecting their nation from flooding. On the night of Jan. 31 that year, much of South Holland drowned when a fierce North Sea storm combined with extraordinary tides to breach the dikes in Zeeland, Zuidholland and Noord-Brabant provinces. That "perfect storm" caused more than 1,800 deaths, destroyed 3,000 homes and forced the evacuation of 72,000 people as it severely damaged almost 500 miles of dikes and flooded some 1,200 square miles (nearly two-thirds) of the country. Never again, Dutch officials assured worried citizens. Holland would do whatever it took to protect its people from the North Sea.

Successive Dutch administrations made good on the pledge over the next 40 years. The ensuing public works project, labeled the Delta Works, produced a series of dams, locks, storm surge barriers and dikes that effectively walled off much of the south part of country from the North Sea - especially the Delta region into which three main rivers drain. Initially budgeted at \$14.5 billion, the project effectively reduced Holland's exposed coastline by 435 miles by cutting off the sea's access to peninsulas and islands that formed much of south Holland's territory.

But Katrina gave Dutch water management officials a jolt. "Katrina really raised political awareness in the Netherlands," Dr. Hans Balfoort, director general of the Water Policy Board, informed the Floridians. "The images (from New Orleans) really hit hard. . . . Katrina changed our way of thinking."

Elaborating, Dr. Piet Dircke, professor of Urban Water Management at Rotterdam University, said, "We always thought we were OK - that it (massive flooding) would never happen again. Katrina showed us it could happen tomorrow. We learned about emergency plans. The Netherlands has none - not a single evacuation plan."

Dutch copying Florida

Moving people out of harm's way is something Florida knows a little something about. Now Holland is developing plans based on the Florida model. The country's first major mock evacuation drill is scheduled to occur this fall.

Of more far-reaching importance, the Dutch see Katrina not as a once-in-a-century weather anomaly but the harbinger of a long period of aberrant weather events that will only make Holland's water problems worse unless it prepares to deal with river flooding now. Extremely high river levels after heavy storms in 1993, '95 and '98 were also seen as a pattern of unpredictable weather that will only worsen as climate change accelerates.

On top of wild weather events, rising sea levels caused by melting polar icecaps add to the Dutch problem. Conservative estimates put the sea level rise over the next 100 years at 7 inches for Holland; more liberal estimates go to 27 inches. Looking out 300 years, the "maximum scenario" of sea level rise for which the Dutch are preparing is 16.4 feet. Yes, that's 16.4 feet.

Thus Katrina sealed a new Dutch strategy for dealing with water from one based on risk avoidance to one that emphasizes risk management. The new Dutch approach is called "Ruimte voor de Rivier" - Space for the Rivers. It's a 10-year, multinational program started in 2006 to enhance flood-protection and environmental improvement of the Delta, initially budgeted at 2.1 billion Euros (\$3.4 billion U.S.).

The name is descriptive of the effort. Instead of simply raising the dikes higher, as the Dutch have done for centuries as their country continues to sink below sea level, this plan focuses on giving the rivers more space to expand and thus to handle greater volumes of water in flooding periods.

It is among the most complex public works projects ever undertaken. In a country known for monumental engineering projects, that's saying a lot. The project will include enlarging river beds, removing groins and other obstacles that retard river flow, deepening the forelands in certain areas to accommodate more water, and actually giving up some precious polders (dike-enclosed land areas) by removing dikes.

All of this will be done in an environmentally-friendly way, cleaning up polluted rivers and streams, enhancing wetlands and beaches while mitigating flooding.

Partnership beneficial

For a people who have been building dikes to hold back water for around 1,200 years, destroying dikes to allow floodwater to spread into farms and homesites has to come as a culture shock - not to mention a heavy financial burden in a country that already spends fully 1 percent of its GNP on water management.

Learning of such ambitious planning, the Florida delegation was left wondering: Do the Dutch know something about climate change that we don't know? If Katrina prompts them to spend prodigious amounts to prepare for impending disaster, why aren't we doing more to protect New Orleans? Or Tampa Bay? Or Jacksonville? Or Miami Beach?

There are no ready answers. But it was clear to the delegation that the Florida-Holland partnership held important benefits for both entities. For Florida, there is the sharing of 1,200 years worth of accumulated knowledge about water management that the Dutch have developed in the continual battle with the North Sea: dike construction, storm-surge barriers, drainage systems, pumping and land management.

For the Dutch, there is potential from sharing in the century of experience Florida has had in dealing with hurricanes: early warning systems, storm-resistant construction standards, evacuation planning and recovery. Also, Florida's concern for the environment offers the Dutch lessons in pollution control, wetlands mitigation and restoration, and preservation of natural lands.

Research is an important factor in the partnership. The Dutch are heavily engaged in research for new technologies to enhance dike stability, forecast weather, move water, advance green initiatives and harness the Internet to gather data. International companies like IBM and Deltares are flocking to Holland to invest in this research.

Behind this research is the impending threat of climate change. Almost everything the Florida delegation heard during its week in Holland was linked to preparations for the effects of climate change. Holland, with two-thirds of its territory below sea level, knows what rising seas could do to the nation's security, both physical and economic. Already the Dutch attribute frequent weather aberrations that have caused heavy flooding throughout Europe to climate change. And they believe this is only the beginning. More ferocious North Sea storms will threaten the dikes, heavier rainfall will create flooding, droughts will dry up fresh water supplies, and rising temperatures will affect crops.

Looking to future

The Dutch have a global focus that has not yet reached policy-makers in the United States. In trade, weather forecasting, technology development, transportation and land use, the Dutch are looking to the kind of world we will inhabit in 300 years. That view is hinged on one unavoidable reality: It's all about water. It is both the lifeblood of the planet as well as its worst potential enemy.

With 2.7 billion people - roughly 40 percent of the world's total population - living in or near coastal cities, many of them in deltas especially vulnerable to rising seas and violent storms, water poses a grave threat to life as well as to economic activity. The disaster in early May in Myanmar after a Category 4 cyclone struck the Irrawaddy Delta, killing tens of thousands, is an all-too-graphic illustration of the global vulnerability. So was New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

What have we learned from those disasters? What can we learn to help us deal with future ones? That is the true bottom line of the Florida-Holland Connection. Bringing together the collective knowledge of both governments, along with the expertise of water professionals on Holland's water boards and Florida's equivalents in the water management districts and Corps of Engineers, offers the hope of survival, even prosperity, if the right policy decisions are made in time.

David Klement, a retired journalist, is the director of the Institute for Public Policy and Leadership at the University of South Florida's Manatee/Sarasota campus. He was a member of the Florida-Holland Connection delegation to The Netherlands in April.

COMMENTARY

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House Natural Resources Subcommittee Reviews Nonnative Wildlife Invasion Prevention Act

06/27/2008

U.S. Newswire

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US Fed News

WASHINGTON, June 27 -- The House Natural Resources subcommittee on fisheries, wildlife and oceans conducted a hearing on "H.R. 6311, NonNative Wildlife Invasion Prevention Act," according to a committee notice published in the Congressional Record.

The subcommittee received testimony at the hearing, which was conducted on June 26, from Gary Frazer, assistant director of Fisheries and Habitat Conservation at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Lori Williams, executive director of the National Invasive Species Council at the U.S. Department of the Interior; Nina Marano, branch chief of Geographic Medicine and Health Promotion Branch in Division of Global Migration and Quarantine at Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Domingo Cravalho Jr., inspection and compliance section chief of Plant Quarantine Branch at the Hawaii Department of Agriculture; Marc Gaden, legislative liaison at the Great Lakes Fishery Commission; George Horne, deputy executive director of operations and maintenance resources at the South Florida Water Management District; Marshall Meyers, executive vice president and general counsel at the Pet Industry Joint Advisory Council; and Lawrence M. Riley, coordinator in Wildlife Management Division at the Arizona Game and Fish Department, the committee website said.

For more information about this report, contact US Fed News through its Washington, D.C.-area office, 703/304-1897 or by e-mail at myron@targetednews.com.

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Python loses faceoff

06/28/2008

Florida Keys Keynoter

Kevin Wadlow Senior Staff Writer

By Kevin Wadlow - Florida Keys Keynoter

Posted-Friday, June 27, 2008 6:59 PM EDT Sue Nulman of Key Largo killed this 7-foot python in her yard Tuesday so it wouldn't attack pets or wildlife. Increasingly, the nonnative animals are being seen in the Keys.

Photo by BRIAN SCHOFIELD Key Largo woman pummels smart' Burmese intruder A Burmese python picked the wrong Key Largo yard for lunch Tuesday. Sue Nulman was startled to see the 7-foot snake devouring one of the doves that flock to a feeder in her bayside yard near mile marker 98.6. Thank goodness there was a big tree limb right next to me, she said. I'd never killed a snake in my life, but I picked up the limb and whacked it a half-dozen times. Her screams brought friend Brian Schofield running to the scene. He carried a 6-foot piece of metal rebar, which they used to dispatch the reptilian intruder. That snake was smart, Nulman said. He was almost completely hidden under the leaves. I didn't want to let him get away because of the damage he could do to wildlife or to pets. Burmese pythons aren't native to South Florida. Large numbers of them are former pets released into the wild, allowing the species to gain a foothold in the wilds of Everglades National Park. They're not poisonous but they can grow to more than a dozen feet long.

Last year, six pythons were captured on North Key Largo - the first confirmed incidents of pythons in the Keys. One was found because it had eaten a Key Largo wood rat that had a radio tracker on it and was being monitored by researchers. And in April, residents of Marathon's Crane Point Hammock subdivision reported seeing a

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python that may be 20 feet or longer. The good news is we haven't had a single one [on North Key Largo] in the last six months, said Steve Klett, manager of the Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge on North Key Largo. But the fall is breeding season, so that's when they'll start moving around more. I know they have them [on North Key Largo] but I never expected to see one in my yard, Nulman said. That snake was big enough to easily kill a 40- or 50-pound pound dog. I wanted to warn people not to leave their pets out. Nulman said the python that took up residence in woods near her home was identified as a male by a state park ranger. The snake must have been nesting in the roots of a dead tree. We have a lot of birds and squirrels so it must have been like a buffet for him, she said. Wildlife experts fear that a rapidly growing population of pythons could threaten native species. Pythons can lay more than 100 eggs at a time. Juvenile pythons could recently be purchased cheaply as pets. Florida now requires a \$100 permit for owners of certain exotic pets that could upset the state's ecological balance if freed.

ATV riders banned from wildlife areas

06/28/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online
Waters, Steve

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On a nice weekend, hundreds of all-terrain vehicles cruise up and down the levee that separates Broward and Palm Beach counties west of U.S. Highway 27.

Other recreational riders venture into the wildlife management areas north and south of the levee but they'll soon have to look elsewhere to ride.

As of Tuesday, ATVs will be banned from more than 700,000 acres and on the levees that serve as boundaries for the four wildlife areas in South Florida.

According to biologists and law enforcement officers with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, some ATV riders are causing damage to the habitat by speeding, carving muddy trails and leaving trash behind. ATV riders are unhappy about the ban because there are so few places to ride in South Florida. 'How can they do that?' Jorge Merino, of Sunrise, said while repairing one of his four-wheelers on the levee. 'This is the only place we've got to ride. I come out here with my kids and my wife like every two weeks,' said Merino, whose children are 8 and 6 years old. 'We try to spend all day out here. It's really fun for the kids.' The areas are less than an hour's ride from Fort Lauderdale, but riding through the sawgrass and slogging through the mud make it seem like a million miles away. 'We're all out here for the same reason, to have fun,' said Jim Spila of Sunrise. 'When I come out here, I don't think about work, I don't think about the election, I don't even remember my girlfriend's name. 'There's got to be a better way to solve this.' According to the commission, limiting recreational ATV riders was the only way.

ATVs will be allowed to be used only by hunters during the archery, muzzleloader and general gun-walk seasons in the Holey Land, Rotenberger, Everglades and Francis S. Taylor wildlife management areas.

ATVs, as well as buggies, track vehicles, airboats and even jeeps and pickup trucks, have long been used in the local management areas.

The closing of other places to ride in South Florida, most due to development of private land, has brought more ATV enthusiasts to the management areas. 'We've seen dramatically increased numbers of ATVs,' wildlife biologist Marsha Ward said. 'It's also the type of riding people do the mud-bogging and the creation of really wide trails. The damage has caused a lot of different problems.' Repeated ATV use through the sawgrass widens the trails and makes small animals such as turtles and rodents that cross those trails easier prey. Lt. Dave Bingham of the commission said that trails

around some of the private camps in the Everglades 'look like a major highway.' Safety also is a concern. Bingham and fellow wildlife officer Lindsay Bruening said there have been search and rescue missions to find lost ATV riders.

Commission officers will be in the areas for the July 4 weekend to make sure ATVs know about the ban. Bingham said the penalty for violating the rule is a \$61 fine. A subsequent violation would be a second-degree misdemeanors punishable by up to 60 days in jail, a \$500 fine or both.

The ban will remain in effect for at least two years.

Steve Waters can be reached at swaters@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4648.

Land Consulting Firm O'Dell Inc. Focuses On Equestrian Projects

06/27/2008

Town-Crier Newspapers, The

Ron Bukley - Town-Crier Newspapers

At a time when many businesses in the industry are cutting back, the land development consulting firm of ODell Inc. in Wellington is expanding, having recently moved into a new, bigger office in the Wellington Business Center on Fairlane Farms Road.

Were growing, Vice President Sue Giddings said. With this economy right now, were very fortunate to be able to continue expanding. Were fighting it for everything we can. Were not going to let the economy get us down. Weve been working very hard on marketing and developing our relationships in the community, as well as with our equestrian clients.

And equestrians are not pulling the reins on development these days. Equestrian clients right now are the ones who are actually out there doing things and spending money, so were very fortunate to have that niche market while the rest of the commercial and residential sector has fallen off, Giddings said. We do equestrian facilities, both commercial and residential. We work with not only the small 10- and 20-acre landowners out in Palm Beach Point and other places, but we also work on large commercial equestrian facilities.

Principal Mike ODell, a civil engineer by education, is a longtime Wellington resident. The business has been here for nine years, he said. Ive been a resident of Wellington since 1980, and Ive worked in Wellington since 1978, so Ive been out here quite a while.

ODell Inc. has been in business since 1999, originally working out of ODells garage.

Giddings, who has a business and accounting background, worked 17 years in the land development industry before she partnered with ODell.

ODell said the company works with property owners to coordinate the work of land planners, architects, landscape architects and other parties involved in development, acting as the property owners representative, guiding them through the governmental approval process and helping them with the land development process overall.

In the maze of developing a parcel of land, theres a process you establish, beginning with conceptualizing what youre going to put on that parcel of land, ODell said. Once youve conceived that process, then the permitting process itself takes a number of steps that go in parallel with one another.

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ODell can work with the owner, and a land planner if necessary, to conceive a project. An engineer will coordinate the water supply and wastewater collection, stormwater management systems and other utilities on the site. The next step is laying out exactly what will go on the site, or part of it, if it is a large project.

Once the project is designed, ODell can take the project through the approval process involving various governmental agencies a process that can be very confusing for the uninitiated. Each governmental agency has their own processes that they go through, ODell explained. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has their forms and regulations. The South Florida Water Management District has theirs. Any municipality that we are working in will have theirs. The federal government has theirs.

Certain county standards must be met, including traffic standards, even though the project might be in a municipality, ODell added.

Multiple things must go on once the project has been conceived and we have agreed with our owner that this is what we want to move forward with, he said. Once the permitting process begins to come to a closure and those permits begin to come in, then the construction activities begin, and we go out and submit the proposals from the various contractors. There are a number of disciplines there, as well. You'll have not only your building contractor, but you'll have your land development contractor who puts in water, sewer, paving and drainage. You'll have the irrigation, landscaping, lighting, electrical. There are a myriad of things that go in the ground that all have to be coordinated so that the building itself can function.

Giddings said one of the firms strengths is to give developers a vision of what to do with a project. Although the company has evolved over the years, project management has always been the core of the business.

When I started as an individual, project management was where I picked up and ran with the ball, ODell recalled. That's how I really got started with this: managing the construction of water, sewer and paving. It has evolved into planning activities and permitting activities simply from the necessity of keeping a project moving forward. We fell into permitting because the permits were holding us up from going into construction, so we decided that we would handle permits as well.

ODell said his company can now provide an overview of all aspects of a project from start to finish. We've gotten into conceptualizing projects for developers just so they can get an idea of what they want to do with a project, a schedule of activities so they will know how long it's going to take them, and also give them a conceptual development budget so they know whether or not this is financially feasible, he said.

Both Giddings and ODell have strong equestrian backgrounds that enable them to work well with the horse community. We have worked more and more with local equestrians, Giddings said. I ride horses and have shown horses for many years. Mike's two daughters ride and show. So we have that personal understanding of equestrians, so we're able to sit down and help design and lay out an equestrian facility because we understand their needs.

The firm also performs due diligence on specific properties and projects for prospective property buyers and developers. We go out and look at the zoning, the legal aspects of what easements lie on the land, as well as utilities available, water, sewer, electric, cable TV, whatever, Giddings said.

Giddings said they also advise whether rezoning or a land use change might be attainable for a specific property.

Equestrian property owners have specific areas of concern when contemplating a project, such as how much fill they need to bring the land to standard, whether they have proper drainage and whether the land has soil issues to address such as muck. They want to make sure they can put all the things on the property that they want, Giddings said. The barn, the size barn they want, the rings. Can I fit it all in there?

Are there going to be any issues?

The company can also advise as to the restrictions involved, where things have to be placed and how things have to go on the site, ODell said. We also understand how an equestrian facility needs to function internally, so that equestrians can utilize their facility efficiently, he said.

ODell Inc. is involved in community service, including the Palms West Chamber of Commerce where Giddings is a board member, and both work with several committees including the government liaison and economic development committees. They are also members of the Wellington Rotary Club and do a lot of charitable work.

One of their community projects is donating their services to the construction of the new Palms West Chamber building on Southern Blvd. at F Road, which recently started the permitting process. It looks like were finally going to be able to break ground in a few more months, Giddings said.

ODell Inc. is located in the Wellington Business Center at 3500 Fairlane Farms Road, Suite 4 and is open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For more information, call (561) 753-7296 or visit www.odell-inc.com.

27.JUN.08 Land Consulting Firm ODell Inc. Focuses On Equestrian Projects

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Energy Group Unveils Manure Proposal

06/27/2008

Wellington Town Crier

Wellington Energy LLC, the winner of a request for proposals put out in 2006 by Wellington to cure the manure problem stacking up in the village, presented its plan at a meeting at the Players Club Tuesday evening.

The two-year-old company claims it can burn stable refuse and turn it into electricity.

Local veterinarian Dr. Scott Swerdlin, the president and CEO of Wellington Energy, led the presentation to about 30 interested residents, with a rundown of how and why they got involved and how they arrived at waste-to-energy as the most practical solution. He stressed the need for everyone to be on board for the solution.

This is going to require a joint effort between the council, the South Florida Water Management [District], Wellington Energy and, most importantly, by the Wellington horsemen. I want to make sure that everybody is in support of this project. What Wellington Energy proposes is a solution which is permanent, green, environmentally sound and cost-effective.

Swerdlin said he got involved largely because his Palm Beach Equine Clinic, with 318 stalls, is probably the villages second-largest manure producer behind the Winter Equestrian Festival.

Wellington has been trying to address the manure issue since its incorporation, he said, as it seeks ways to prevent the seepage of phosphorus into its surface water in accordance with Everglades restoration programs.

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Wellington, as many of you know, is in the process of rewriting its best management practices, and they're going to look for all of our input in trying to attain the best solutions, he said. The contractual relationship between the SFMWD and the Village of Wellington is that they will correct this and take steps to rewrite its best management practices. Unfortunately it's not optional it's mandatory. The village is being held to correcting its phosphorous problem.

Researching solutions, Swerdlin said, Wellington Energy determined that composting and anaerobic digestion disposal solutions would be inferior to a waste-to-energy plan.

Composting does not work well because of the shavings mixed in with the manure, which take much longer to break down, he said.

Composting takes a long time and in some cases it takes more than a year, he said.

The volume of more than 3,000 cubic yards of manure and shavings per day from about 9,000 horses during peak season creates massive storage and retention issues, Swerdlin said.

You cannot let the water that comes from this composting to leach into the Florida Everglades Basin. A hundred days of 3,000 cubic yards a day is a lot of manure, he said.

After composting, about a third of the material remains, which must be disposed of, Swerdlin noted.

Swerdlin said anaerobic digestion requires a high capital outlay and is not cost efficient. A similar program at Palm Meadows in Fort Lauderdale produced less-than-satisfactory results, he said. The problem is they're still left with a third of their product and how to dispose of it, Swerdlin said.

The leftovers are also a nasty cocktail including contaminated wood waste, nitrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide and ammonia that contribute to other pollution issues. Living next to a digester can be really unpleasant, Swerdlin said. I cannot put one close by.

With fuel at more than \$4 per gallon, Swerdlin said the cost of getting the manure to a distant processing plant would be prohibitive. The process is also high maintenance, he said. First you have to separate the shavings, he said. One horse requires 19 feet of digester volume.

This is 100 32,250-cubic-foot tanks, 18 and a half feet tall by 18 feet in diameter, he said, referring to research by James Baker of North Carolina State University.

However, Swerdlin's company has been working closely with the village to come up with a solution, he said.

The solution they came up with was to treat the product as an alternative energy source and to be environmentally sound, he said.

The waste-to-energy plant would consume all the horse manure and shavings in Wellington, and with no storage requirement there would be no odor or leaching issues. Operating on a total combustion basis, the only byproduct would be a two percent potash residue suitable for use in fertilizer and for road stabilization, he said.

Michael Virr, president of Spinheat Ltd. of Fairfield, Conn., is Wellington Energy's engineer. He said the plant would be compact in size, built on about a six-acre site. Virr said his company built a similar privately operated plant near Pittsburgh, Penn. for the state prison system.

Swerdlin and Wellington Energy CFO/COO Michael Fawcett said the plant could be

built for about \$15 million. The enclosed building would produce no odor, noise or emissions and could burn about 360 tons of manure daily, about the amount generated each day by 9,000 horses at peak season, he said.

During peak season the plant would operate in three shifts, and at one shift in the off-season. Electricity generated from the plant would be sold to FPL for about 5.4 cents per kilowatt hour to reduce an industrial revenue bond, which would be necessary, as well as a franchise agreement to guarantee that the company would have a certain flow of manure into the plant.

The plant would have two boilers generating three megawatts of electricity. The operation would be low maintenance and largely automatic once it gets started, Swerdlin said.

The process is started with oil or natural gas heating a 30-inch bed of sand. Once the sand is heated to 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit it can ignite the manure and the burning process can continue on its own, Virr said. It takes an hour to get it hot and running, he said. As it starts to burn, the manure keeps it running.

The room where the manure is dumped from trucks is under suction so the odor is kept inside the building, Virr said.

Swerdlin said several locations have been explored on the periphery of the villages equestrian overlay including on 50th Street and Flying Cow Road and one site out of village limits, but none specifically had been selected.

Energy production would be the most cost-efficient solution for the village, Swerdlin said. While not as cheap as ignoring the problem, it is necessary if the equestrian industry is to remain in Wellington due to the requirements placed on the village by regulatory agencies.

One attendee asked if the company will control the price charged to horse owners if it has a franchise. Fawcett, also a horseman and a former anti-trust attorney, said the companys primary intention is to solve the manure problem, not to get a stranglehold on an industry. The franchise held by Wellington Energy would be similar to the cable television franchise and subject to Wellington control, he said.

Our level of commitment is to make it a cost-effective solution. The reason we seek a flow control ordinance is that we require a secure feed stock, he said.

Palm Beach Polo CEO Glenn Straub said the waste-to-energy plan looked more reasonable than any other process he had seen. We want to keep this industry here, he said. If you dont solve the problem, the environmentalists will shut it down. search archives

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