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EVERGLADES: Will sugar buyout change restoration equation?

07/07/2008

Environment & Energy Daily

Cusick, Daniel

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Daniel Cusick, Greenwire reporter

Conventional wisdom has long held that the fate of the Everglades would hinge on a death match between environmentalists and Big Sugar.

Last month, U.S. Sugar Corp. cried uncle, agreeing to cease operations and turn over its Everglades Agricultural Area holdings to Florida in exchange for \$1.75 billion.

Now there are new questions: Is that enough? Is the company's 300 or so square miles of property south of Lake Okeechobee the critical missing piece in the unfinished, often baffling restoration puzzle?

Several of Florida's most influential restoration advocates have offered an unequivocal, enthusiastic answer: Yes. But they caution that critical details remain to be worked out, including how the newly purchased land will be incorporated into the \$11 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) launched by the federal and state governments almost nine years ago.

"This opportunity comes but once in a lifetime, or maybe several lifetimes," said Nathaniel Reed, vice chairman of the Everglades Foundation, assistant Interior secretary under Presidents Nixon and Ford and an environmental adviser to eight Florida governors.

"It is our one opportunity to make corrections that will, over a surprisingly short period of time, reap huge benefits for the Everglades and make this restoration the best that it can be," Reed said in an interview.

Bob Graham, the former Florida governor and U.S. senator, said the deal sends a strong signal to Everglades advocates, many of whom have grown skeptical that restoration would be completed in their lifetimes, that the state is committed to moving forward.

"It has an important psychological effect in that the Everglades has been sort of in limbo almost since the federal-state partnership was established in 2000," the Democrat said from his office in Miami Lakes.

Graham said the purchase would tamp down speculation that the sugar industry's two dominant players -- U.S. Sugar and Florida Crystals Corp. -- intend to sell their lands to developers that would convert the historic mill towns of Clewiston and Belle Glade into sprawling residential or commercial properties.

But the sugar deal, expected to close by November, cannot by itself resolve the complicated -- some say intractable -- problems that have vexed federal and state agencies overseeing the restoration since it began in earnest nearly nine years ago.

Criticism

While the U.S. Sugar sale will eventually bring vast tracts of farmland into the state's conservation portfolio, allowing for the construction of large new water storage and treatment reservoirs, the deal will not provide what some advocates consider the hydrological "holy grail," a flow-way that would allow water to move unimpeded from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades to Florida Bay.

Creating such a watercourse will require a series of land exchanges with the state's other major sugar producer, Florida Crystals Corp. of Palm Beach County. While state officials say they are optimistic about negotiating such deals, no announcements have been made. "Everybody seems to be counting on the swap," a Florida Crystals spokesman told the Palm Beach Post late last month.

Critics, including the Miccosukee Tribe, whose ancestral lands lie within the heart of the Everglades, have tongue-lashed the state for allowing sugar farmers to gradually phase out their operations, even as runoff from sugarfields continues to diminish water quality throughout the region.

"To announce something is going to happen six years from now with no plans for how they're going to do it while diverting funding away from essential projects is a tragedy," Dexter Lehtinen, the tribe's senior attorney and a former federal prosecutor, said last week.

Another attorney for the tribe suggested the state's purchase of U. S. Sugar was "an impulse buy," and that the South Florida Water Management District, which will issue bonds to finance the purchase, risks losing momentum on other critical projects, such as those authorized under the state's Acceler8 program.

Proponents of the deal said such criticisms are unfounded,

especially given the broad consensus among Everglades stakeholders that the only path to full restoration is for the sugar industry to give up much of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) immediately south of Lake Okeechobee.

"The notion that buying large tracts of land in the EAA is somehow a newfangled, impulsive type of strategy is simply out in left field," said Shannon Estenez, vice chairman of the water district's governing board and a longtime advocate for restoration.

"We have always understood that storing water in the EAA was a critical piece of the program," Estenez added. "That's where the natural system held all of its water, so that's where the water needs to go in a properly restored system."

David Reiner, president of the nonprofit group Friends of the Everglades, which like the Miccosukee Tribe has battled the water district over many of its Everglades management policies, said his organization has long believed that the restoration was hamstrung by insufficient water storage. The U.S. Sugar deal, he said, "is a big step in that direction."

Getting water flowing

But a revamped storage plan by itself will not solve the Everglades' problems, which are as much about where water flows as about where it is stored.

Major structural impediments to flow, including the Tamiami Trail highway, which keeps water from reaching Everglades National Park, remain unresolved even after Congress ordered the Army Corps of Engineers to speed up its efforts to elevate portions of the highway so that water can flow underneath into the park.

Terrence "Rock" Salt, the Interior Department's top restoration official in Florida, said last week that the corps expects to begin the first phase of the Tamiami Trail elevation project, known as Modified Water Deliveries, by the end of this fiscal year.

Phase 1 of "Mod Waters," as the project is known locally, calls for building a 1-mile bridge across the easternmost stretch of Tamiami Trail to allow water to flow underneath, while also building up the roadbed along adjacent sections of the highway to protect vehicles from higher water levels necessary to encourage flows.

"I am very encouraged with respect to Mod Waters," Salt said, adding that senior Bush administration officials in Washington have maintained pressure on federal agencies in Florida to keep the project moving forward. "I think we're on a path to having this important start on the improvements to Tamiami Trail. We don't want to take our eye off of that ball."

Other projects that also continue to move forward, and that should aide the broader implementation of the restoration effort, include the Kissimmee River restoration north of Lake Okeechobee; the replumbing of Picayune Strand in Everglades National Park's next-door neighbor, Big Cypress National Preserve; and the construction of a major water distribution project, called the C-111 Spreader Canal, in Miami-Dade County.

Officials also say they remain committed to completing eight projects fast-tracked by former Gov. Jeb Bush (R) under the state-

led Acceler8 program. So far, the state has invested more than \$2 billion toward completion of these projects, several of which involve the storage and treatment of polluted stormwater runoff in the EAA and around Lake Okeechobee.

The water district has already suspended work on one Acceler8 project, a 16,500-acre reservoir under construction in western Palm Beach County, though the agency maintains the work-stop is due to a lawsuit filed by environmentalists, not the pending land purchase.

Controversial well project

Ken Ammon, the water management district's deputy executive director and chief overseer of Everglades restoration, said the Acceler8 reservoir project may prove unnecessary if the state completes the U.S. Sugar deal, thus allowing for much greater storage capacity southwest of Lake Okeechobee. In that event, the reservoir project probably would be reconfigured as a stormwater treatment area, he said.

Officials said another major initiative that could be reconfigured under a new water storage scenario is the highly controversial and expensive aquifer storage and recovery (ASR) project, which calls for pumping as much as 1 trillion gallons of water into underground wells.

The Corps of Engineers has spent roughly \$10 million on ASR test wells on the north side of Lake Okeechobee, with mixed results. Some of the water pumped out of the test wells, for example, had elevated arsenic levels, possibly caused by chemical reactions between the water and underground rock formations.

With a greatly expanded surface reservoir system on former sugarcane fields south of the lake, officials say the ASR project could be scaled back by as much as two-thirds, resulting in savings of more than \$1 billion.

Glades restoration plan hinges on land trade with Fanjul family

07/08/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Peter Franceschina, Andy Reid & Ryan McNeill

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Peter Franceschina, Andy Reid & Ryan McNeill-South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The powerful and politically savvy Fajul family is in the catbird seat when it comes to the multibillion-dollar Everglades restoration plan.

That's because its Florida Crystals sugar operation owns roughly 35,000 acres of sugar cane that South Florida water managers need if they are to complete their ambitious plan for a "flow-way" connecting Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Now that the South Florida Water Management District has announced plans to buy 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar for \$1.75 billion and put that sugar giant out of business, ownership of the Fajul land becomes the largest challenge to the proposed restoration's success.

The Fajuls "have leverage in this case because they have land that the water management district needs, so that gives them an advantage," said Bill Malone, a retired water district land negotiator. "And I think they will do their best to play that advantage to their benefit. They always have."

The valuable position held by the Fajuls will not only help them get top dollar from the district but also raises the specter that they may want more than to just trade their land for U.S. Sugar land. They may want special deals for development or lucrative rock mining.

One goal of Everglades restoration is to re-create, as much as possible, the natural flow of water across farmland long polluted by agricultural chemicals.

When Gov. Charlie Crist announced the U.S. Sugar deal, he called the company's land the "missing link." But the district still needs some or all of the Florida Crystals land to complete the link. District officials want to trade U.S. Sugar land outside the flow-way for Florida Crystals land inside the flow-way.

The poker game isn't even at the ante-up stage yet.

"They obviously can't build the flow-way without it because we have 35,000 acres right in the middle of it," said Gaston Cantens, vice president for corporate relations for Florida Crystals. "They have not communicated what they want. We don't have the details yet."

"We have not yet begun negotiations with Florida Crystals," said Ruth Clements, the district's director of land acquisition and development.

The Talisman deal

Florida Crystals gained control over nearly half of its current flow-way land through the district's purchase of Talisman Sugar, a large grower and landowner. Water managers didn't need all that land, but they needed room for water treatment and storage projects conceived early in the state-federal restoration plan.

Talisman was the district's single largest land acquisition, in price

and acreage — \$133.5 million for 52,000 acres — when it was completed in 1999.

In the wheeling and dealing, Florida Crystals was left with about 15,000 acres, valued then at \$44 million, in what is now described as the flow-way. In return, the district accumulated land outside the flow-way for its projects.

Back then, district officials had no inkling the Florida Crystals land ever could become central to Everglades restoration — and the idea of Big Sugar selling out seemed preposterous.

"Unfortunately, we did not have a crystal ball 10 years ago," Clements said.

Now, the district is offering U.S. Sugar approximately \$9,360 per acre.

The land alone isn't worth that much; the \$1.75 billion proposal covers all assets, including office buildings, a Clewiston sugar mill, a citrus plant and a private railroad.

Florida Crystals also has a sugar mill and electricity generating plant on its flow-way property. Some observers have floated the idea of a trade for the newer U.S. Sugar mill.

The potential swaps could be the "sticky wicket," said Allen Zech, manager of agricultural appraisals at the Palm Beach County Property Appraiser's Office. The Fanjuls have great leverage and could want a 2-for-1 land swap, Zech said.

Alfonso and Jose Fanjul, born into one of Cuba's most powerful pre-Castro families, have long run the lucrative Florida sugar business begun by their father and have always contributed heavily to both Democrats and Republicans, Federal Election Commission records show.

Land values

For the impending deal with the district, traditional agricultural land values are out the window. The U.S. Sugar deal dramatically changes the land-value dynamic because the state is acquiring land for restoration, not farming.

When used for sugar cane, the Florida Crystals property appraises for about \$3,500 to \$3,800 an acre, Zech said. As restoration land, it is far more valuable.

"We are not talking about a fair market value," Zech said. "It is like sitting at a poker game. You are just trying to out-bluff one another and get the best deal possible.

"Find out who has got the deepest pockets."

Malone, who was the lead water district official in negotiating the Talisman deal, said Florida Crystals may want more than just other sugar land or money.

"My concern would be what other kinds of concessions Florida Crystals might want, whether it's the ability to mine rock or the ability to do some development," he said.

Cantens said Florida Crystals wants to negotiate with the district

even as officials move to close the U.S. Sugar deal in the next two months.

"We are very open-minded and positive about sitting with the state and the water management district and having these conversations," he said.

Malone has sat across the table from Florida Crystals' lawyers.

"They are tough negotiators. They are hard negotiators," Malone said.

Clements, the district's top land-acquisition executive, says she, too, knows how to play hardball.

"I favor myself as a tough negotiator, too," she said. "We will see."

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Take an Interactive tour

Learn more about the history of the sugar cane industry in South Florida and take an interactive tour through the Everglades at Sun-Sentinel.com/sugar

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Save Everglades, or the Glades?

07/08/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Engelhardt, Joel

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It's an exciting time for the proposed Glades inland port. It has a new name - inland logistics center - so people don't imagine cruise ships on Lake Okeechobee. But there's more. The proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar means land - lots of it - in state ownership. What the inland port needs more than anything is cheap land. The state, through the South Florida Water Management District, could make that happen. And that's not all. Aside from 300 square miles of land, the U.S. Sugar sale includes a fully operational railroad. The South Central Florida Express encircles Lake Okeechobee and connects to the area's two main freight lines, the CSX and the FEC.

Land and rail are critical components to extend the reach of South Florida's ports - not just the smaller Port of Palm Beach but the larger Port Everglades in Broward County and . The idea in the Glades is: They're running out of warehouse and distribution land down there, so why not make it available up here? It's not hard to think that the \$1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar could help an 'inland logistics center' provide a much-needed job base.

But the buyout also could get in the way. The purpose of the buyout is to save the Everglades. Water managers envision a series of cleansing marshes and reservoirs flooding the land south

of Lake Okeechobee to the Broward County line.

And it just so happens that the most promising site for an inland port - er, 'inland logistics center' - is right smack in the middle of the flood zone. A site owned by U.S. Sugar and the Fanjul family-run Florida Crystals is singled out in a July 3 letter from Director Bill Johnson as the site that 'appears to offer the best benefit for the .' That's important because the is the best bet among South Florida ports to get a share of the new Asian import market that is expected to hit America's East Coast after the expansion of the Panama Canal in 2014. Think colossal ships loaded with goods destined for Wal-Mart and Home Depot.

Last year, in a feasibility report by Cambridge Systematics Inc., U. S. Sugar and Florida Crystals 'expressed an interest in discussing alternate land uses' beyond farming. That Florida Crystals contemplated giving up cane fields south of the lake is a positive for the water district; it signals Florida Crystals' interest in getting out. But the fact that the land likely will be flooded to save the Everglades is a 'logistical' downer for the inland port.

A second potential site is owned by none other than U.S. Sugar. It's 3,500 acres east of the lake near Pahokee and it could soon belong to the water management district. But lo and behold, what do water managers say they would do with that land? They want to trade it for the Florida Crystals land south of the lake. If the Fanjuls won't trade, the U.S. Sugar buyout is in jeopardy.

But if the first site will be flooded and the second site will be traded, where does that leave the inland port? Site No. 3, the Pratt & Whitney facility west of Jupiter, is too small. Site No. 4, near Indiantown in Martin County, and Site 5, in Highlands County, remain eligible.

One site not mentioned in the feasibility study could make a lot of sense: Hendry County. If the deal goes through, U.S. Sugar leaves in six years, devastating Hendry's economy. One way the water district can keep the community alive is by helping to deliver a successful 'inland logistics center.' But the port needs more than cheap land. A second, perhaps equally daunting challenge, is to step into this newfound restoration environment with a plan to lay more railroad tracks through a flood zone. To take advantage of all that shipping destined for Miami, the inland port would depend on a rail line linking South Bay and Miami along U.S. 27.

Environmentalists are likely to howl at the prospect of more rail, which can block water flow. But the Legislature has ordered a feasibility study. And rail may be the way to save Clewiston and the Palm Beach County lake towns of South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee.

The public is going to hear a lot in coming months about the inland port/logistics center. Without land and rail, however, the idea has about as much chance as cruise ships on Lake Okeechobee.

U.S. Sugar deal a milestone in restoring River of Grass

07/08/2008

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

The announcement by Gov. Charlie Crist to purchase approximately 187,000 acres of the Everglades Agricultural Area is tremendous news and a significant milestone in efforts to restore America's Everglades.

Acquisition of this farmland south of Lake Okeechobee will improve water quality and increase water quantity flowing south to Everglades National Park and ultimately out into Florida Bay, simultaneously restoring coastline ecosystems on the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers.

The state of Florida continues to show its commitment to restoring the historic River of Grass and making America's Everglades a vibrant ecosystem once again. This deal provides an opportunity to revitalize federal participation in this endeavor and to reinvest federal funding toward restoration goals.

We all must pledge to continue progress to restore our River of Grass.

This is essential to our economic survival and quality of life in South Florida, and the heritage of our children and grandchildren.

Kahlil Kettering

Biscayne Restoration Analyst National Parks Conservation Assoc.
Sun Coast Regional Office Hollywood

Kudos for Everglades plan, but lives around lake at stake

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The applauds Gov. Crist's bold and exciting proposal to purchase 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar and use that land to restore natural water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. We also applaud the vote to take the initial agreement forward ('Crist coup applauded, except oil jibes,' June 25). This concept discussed is the very plan to save the Everglades that was first proposed by the late Art Marshall, back in 1981. As the governor aptly recognized, this land is the 'missing link' needed to restore the River of Grass. Finally, after decades of delay, a positive solution is at hand.

While we have much to celebrate with this proposal, we concur with the water district governing board that there are impacts that deserve critical review, particularly the loss of agricultural jobs and the economic impact on people's lives, especially the disadvantaged minority residents of Belle Glade, Clewiston, Pahokee and South Bay.

One solution to improving economics previously suggested is ecotourism based on a nature center and a restored pond apple forest on Torry and Kreamer islands and similar endeavors elsewhere. We also calculate that an innovative approach to use of this land will save billions of dollars in operations and maintenance costs over the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan life cycle by reducing pumping requirements.

As a leading proponent of Everglades restoration, and because so much of our effort over the past decade has been in education and community outreach, the Marshall Foundation is well-positioned to work with the Everglades Coalition, other not-for-profit organizations and governmental officials to address these concerns.

The challenges ahead are real, but Art Marshall's dream of Everglades restoration may truly be at hand. Many thanks to Gov. Crist and his team, along with the leaders of the SFWMD, for their innovative visionary approach.

JOHN ARTHUR MARSHALL, chairman of the board, and Florida Environmental Institute Inc.

West Palm Beach Editor's note: John Arthur Marshall is the nephew of the late Arthur R. Marshall.

FLORIDA Big Land Purchase Triggers Review of Plans to Restore Everglades

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Everglades dream coming true?

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An editorial / By Rich Campbell, Scripps Howard News Service editorials and opinion

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

Michael Grunwald hinted at the dream in his book, "The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida and the Politics of Paradise," when he wrote: "Everglades activists still dream of converting the sugar fields into reservoirs, and perhaps even flow ways reconnecting Lake Okeechobee to the River of Grass." In a perfect world, the natural flow of sheet water from Lake O to Florida Bay would be restored. And the Everglades, long the stepchild of agricultural and developmental interests, would receive all the water required to rejuvenate itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But then, suddenly, the dream was rekindled.

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

The price for both the land and U.S. Sugar's assets \$1.75 billion is staggering, and will require a mammoth financial commitment by Florida taxpayers. If auditors determine this to be fair market value, it will be money well spent.

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

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

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

"Inexpressibly wonderful"? That's how people talk when dreams come true.

Editorial: Water managers in South Florida starting to get priorities straight

07/08/2008

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Stuart News

Editorial: Water managers in South Florida starting to get priorities straight, but what about those charged with preserving the St. Johns River?

Years from now, historians may look back upon the month recently concluded as the pivotal moment in the preservation and restoration of the Everglades.

Gov. Charlie Crist rocked the environmental world in late June when he announced a tentative deal with U.S. Sugar to purchase 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee.

The deal, at a potential cost of \$1.75 billion, has rekindled hopes of re-establishing the natural flow of water from Lake O to the River of Grass a process everyone agrees is vital to restoring the Everglades.

The state's deal with U.S. Sugar has garnered much of the attention and rightfully so.

However, another event less publicized but highly important also occurred in June that bodes extremely well for Everglades restoration. Moreover, it provides keen insight into the new thinking required to preserve and reinvigorate the state's fragile ecosystem.

Shortly before the deal was announced with U.S. Sugar, the South Florida Water Management District launched a new initiative: to reserve water for environmental needs in particular, for fish and wildlife in the Kissimmee River north of Lake O.

Because water in the Kissimmee flows into the lake = and then is distributed throughout the region for a variety of uses the district's decision has significant implications for all of South Florida.

District officials have taken the precedent-setting step of establishing guidelines governing the allocation of water in the Kissimmee. As Chip Merriam, deputy executive director of water resources for SFWMD, wrote in a memo to board members:

"The district is identifying river water for consumptive use and water for the protection of fish and wildlife. The water identified for the natural system may be protected through a water reservation as contemplated and authorized under state law."

What does this mean? The river's environmental needs may soon take precedence over agricultural and developmental needs. Additionally, the latter groups would be allowed to tap into this source only after the natural ecosystem has received an adequate supply of water.

This is a groundbreaking approach to water management. But this is how it should be.

Contrast this important policy change with the approach by the St. Johns River Water Management District which has allowed water-intensive developments to imperil the St. Johns River and you begin to grasp the far-reaching implications for the environment.

South Florida water managers are to be applauded for moving boldly in this direction. St. Johns managers need to get on board.

Stricter water-reservation rules are needed in water districts throughout the state to ensure this valuable resource is used first for environmental needs.

A sweeter road to recovery

07/08/2008

Orlando Sentinel

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Jack E. Davis | Special To The Sentinel

Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who died 10 years ago, said that the Everglades could not be the River of Grass as long as agriculture blocked their natural flow. She would have offered Charlie Crist's bold plan to buy out U.S. Sugar's vast property holdings the approval of an emeritus activist. She loathed Big Sugar and its well-documented record as an abuser of human rights and polluter of the Everglades.

Big Sugar is the illegitimate child of Fidel Castro's rise to power, which ushered in a federal embargo on Cuban-grown sugar, quotas on other foreign sugar, and federal price supports for domestic sugar. According to an independent report, when market prices dropped below the established minimum in 1985, taxpayers shelled out \$78 million to beet and cane growers.

Meanwhile, taxpayers also subsidized the federally coordinated offshore-labor program. The workers, mostly from sugar-growing countries of the Caribbean hit hard by the U.S. import quotas, were subjected to some of the worst conditions American labor has ever known.

Taxpayers have also supported sugar's Sasquatch-size water footprint. From the late 1940s to the 1970s, the federal and state governments spent more than \$500 million to destroy the natural system and replumb the Everglades for both the swelling coastal metropolises and corporate agriculture. At the end of the century, according to another study, agriculture paid much less for water than did urban dwellers, and agriculture contributed less than 1.7 percent of the taxes that funded the South Florida Water Management District's annual budget. In another scenario, urban businesses generated around \$82,000 in goods, jobs and services for each acre foot of water they used, while agriculture generated only \$1,100.

Taxpayers are now paying to clean up sugar's pollution -- the phosphorus-fouled water in Lake Okeechobee, the Everglades and Everglades National Park downstream. Countless lawsuits against the polluters have cost citizens millions of dollars. Accommodating water managers historically have kept conditions wet for the benefit of sugar when the Everglades were supposed to be seasonally dry. By turns, during a five-year drought in the 1960s, water managers deprived the park of sustenance but kept agriculture quenched.

All may soon be history. It is unclear if any U.S. Sugar land will be used to reconnect the Everglades with its watershed, Lake Okeechobee, or used solely to create filtering swamps. One thing is certain: U.S. Sugar's departure will mean more water for the Everglades. It also is likely to help improve the engineering and political dynamics of water management and the flawed Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, which was blueprinted to include agriculture and prioritize commercial water use. Big Sugar will soon become less big, and perhaps other growers will sense their dwindling political clout and head to the exit door.

To be fair, U.S. Sugar in recent years has improved its labor relations and reduced its environmental impact. One must also feel for the hardworking people in the company town of Clewiston.

They will sacrifice their livelihoods for the good of the greater whole of us. Douglas believed in the endurance of humanity, and would have trusted American ingenuity to help Clewiston sort out its future. She campaigned aggressively for the rights and dignity of working people, but she knew a dying Everglades benefited no one.

Private-property ownership in an ecosystem as vital to humanity as the Everglades makes as much sense as carving up oceans into real estate. The provisional buyout can be viewed as one last subsidy designed to put all previous subsidies and the barriers to real restoration to rest. When U.S. Sugar pulls up stakes, the Everglades can begin the slow recovery from decades of suffering for corporate profit and start living again for all of us.

Jack E. Davis is an associate professor of history at the University of Florida and the author of "An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century," to be published in February.

Land purchase is big, wet boost for Florida Everglades

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New Scientist

The ambitious Florida Everglades restoration project has lurched one massive step forward. The state announced last week that it would buy 75,000 hectares of land from the US Sugar Corporation, a deal that could help restore the flow of fresh water through the wetland ecosystem.

Scientists working on the more than \$10 billion project, approved by Congress in 2000, were stunned and delighted by the news. 'Most folks were resigned to the fact that it would be hard to acquire that much land,' says Don Boesch at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.

The Everglades depend on the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee south to Florida Bay, but agriculture and development have reduced water volume and quality. Returned to a marshland state, this land should open a path for water flow, and provide much needed water storage in dry seasons.

ALLAN ACEVEDO Florida Governor Crist, fake environmentalist

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Green is the new black, as far as environmentalism is concerned. Our generation has seen a transformation. Sustainability has finally become a household word.

I am proud to help protect the environment. So when showboating politicians who only care about their appearance start using 'being green' for nefarious purposes, resentment creeps in.

Recently, Republican Florida Gov. Charlie Crist has announced that the state is on the verge of purchasing roughly 300 square miles of land from U.S. Sugar Corporation, a major sugar producer. The deal would cost the state \$1.75 billion and is supposedly intended to help restore a sizable portion of the Everglades. If your suspicions are raised by a Republican touting environmentally-friendly policy, your doubts are well-founded.

Just for the sake of argument, though, let's assume this intention is true. Hypothetically, this would be a good move to help eliminate drought problems. Repossession of the land would help reverse the years of intrusion and damage to the area by companies producing sugar cane. U.S. Sugar Corp. was previously the source of several damaging by-products found in the Everglades, including fertilizers, gasoline and other environmental pollutants. Preserving natural ecosystems is important, and the Sierra Club is on board with the plan. All of this sounds squeaky green.

Unfortunately, this is not the deal's true intention, and the resulting pretty picture is just a fantasy. If you look beyond the catchy environmentalist phrases and hyped conservation initiatives, you'll see the ugly politics behind what is really happening.

The proposed deal would allow U.S. Sugar Corp. to operate for six more years. At that point, the refinery and property will be taken over by the state. Florida is even offering to retrain the 1,700 current U.S. Sugar Corp. employees.

This sounds awfully generous of Florida, and it rightfully raises skepticism. The sugar company is under a myriad of economic pressures from low-price sugar imports, so the company, even the industry, is in a mini-recession of its own. In that case, the state of Florida's generosity becomes a bailout.

One clue is how Crist is trying to frame the situation what amounts to, "The big evil sugar company is killing the ecosystem, we must defend it!" It's a pathetic attempt to emulate the opposition we feel for "Big Oil." The next think you know, Baskin-Robins and Ben & Jerry's are going to become "Big Ice Cream."

This environmental propaganda is more self-serving than

anything. The move needs to be seen for what it really is - Crist hoping to attract the attention of McCain in order to boost his chances of snagging "vice president" on the Republican ticket. Sustainable development does not include taxpayers saving corporations from their own demise, just because they were not able to compete with low-cost imports, or "potentially not being able to meet water quality requirements" five years from now. With so much at stake and so many accrued costs - don't forget the vast expenses of the 1,700 employees who will need to be retrained - at minimum, Florida taxpayers should have voted upon a decision like this.

Florida should not be spending \$1.75 billion in an attempt to "restore" what amounts to a corporate-polluted swamp, especially considering that there's less polluted land that should have priority. Unfortunately, this bodes well for Crist, who will be venerated by the environmentalist movement for supporting a "positive" environmental development.

While sustainable development should be at the top of our priorities, this is not a step in the right direction. U.S. Sugar Corp. is under major pressure with its dwindling profits, but it is not up to the state to bail them out, especially after all the harm they've done to the ecosystem. Three hundred square miles is pretty insignificant, especially because the approximate size of the Everglades is 11,000 square miles.

If Crist wants to convince the public of his green intentions, he'll have to do something more than just salvage a dismal scrap of abused land while conveniently bailing out a flailing corporation. Until then, don't be convinced.

Allan Acevedo is a political science and ISCOR freshman and a staff columnist.

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Ethanol: Miracle or Mistake?

07/08/2008
Florida Trend
Vogel, Mike

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By Mike Vogel - Florida Trend

At his global warming summit in Miami last year, Gov. Charlie Crist held out ethanol as a major tool in reducing greenhouse gases. No state, he said, can match Florida's capacity to produce ethanol. Since virtually all the ethanol in the U.S. is made from corn, Crist was anticipating a time when Florida entrepreneurs could take various forms of cellulose that are plentiful in the state — citrus waste, sugar cane waste, plants and trees — and distill ethanol from them.

Following Crist's green lead, the Legislature this year mandated that all gas sold in Florida have at least 10% ethanol by the end of 2010. That translates into Florida needing some 861 million gallons of ethanol annually in less than three years. At May's going price for a gallon of ethanol, that's \$2.4 billion worth each year — money that the lawmakers don't want to flow only to corn farmers and ethanol distillers in the Midwest. To spur production in Florida, the Legislature allocated \$8 million this year for bioenergy project grants and another \$7 million for renewable energy and efficiency grants.

That's on top of the \$60 million the state already has given to would-be ethanol developers and other biofuel researchers in Florida. "About every state has a cellulosic ethanol initiative," says University of Florida professor Lonnie Ingram, who has a \$20-million state grant to build a cellulosic ethanol demonstration plant with sugar maker Florida Crystals in Palm Beach County. "There's a lot of money being put into this area."

Indeed. The federal government, which has been pushing cellulosic ethanol for more than 30 years without so much as one commercial refinery to show for it, has mandated 36 billion gallons of ethanol — 16 billion from cellulose — in use by 2022 and is funding a host of research efforts around the country.

But even as the government pours out research dollars and ethanol-use mandates, new questions have arisen — and old questions persist — about whether ethanol can live up to its billing as the clean, green path to energy independence.

Aside from the now-debated question whether ethanol may actually be worse for the environment than fossil fuels, cost and risk remain a big issue, even with oil spiking northward of \$130 a barrel.

Chemically, ethanol's not hard to make — it's just a matter of distilling alcohol from sugar. "Everybody who has moonshined" knows how to make ethanol, says Ali Raissi, director of the University of Central Florida's advanced energy division, who is leading research on a state grant. The problem is that it's technologically hard and expensive to break down cellulose, the woody parts of plants and trees, into a fermentable, simple sugar.

Producing ethanol also can require copious water. At three gallons of water per gallon of ethanol — some methods require more — meeting the state's ethanol quota with Florida-produced ethanol would translate into using an additional 2.5 billion gallons of water each year in a state already struggling with the demand on its water resources.

Some experts question ethanol's green friendliness in other ways. Princeton University researcher Tim Searchinger touched off widespread biofuel skepticism earlier this year in a Science magazine study that looked at how growing crops for fuel drives changes in land use. Searchinger favors using waste products as fuel sources. But he says using citrus waste for ethanol could be a poor choice in terms of greenhouse gas emissions if it induces growers to cultivate untouched land to grow animal feed to replace the citrus waste.

Ingram, the UF researcher, would seem to have the solution for all. He says he hopes his cellulosic ethanol process will be not only water neutral, but also may generate water. His pilot refinery also will use a farming byproduct rather than a crop — sugar bagasse, the crushed sugar cane stalks left over after the sugar juice is extracted. (It later will use yard and wood waste, among other sources.)

At present, sugar industry titan Florida Crystals burns that bagasse along with yard waste from Palm Beach County to generate electricity at its Okeelanta site, the largest biomass co-generation energy plant in North America. Gaston Cantens, Florida Crystals' government relations vice president, says the expectation is that Ingram's process will first refine the bagasse into ethanol. Then the part of the bagasse that can't become fuel will be burned for electricity. Ingram's cellulosic ethanol breakthrough first was patented 17 years ago, however, and there's still no refinery.

At least two other researchers using state grants are working on other ways to make bagasse into fuel. But since there's not enough bagasse to fuel Florida, state officials are banking on making cellulosic ethanol out of everything from suburban yard trimmings to wood from Florida's forests. It didn't get encouraging news in June when Florida agribusiness firm and land developer Alico announced it was abandoning plans to build a plant in LaBelle that would have turned yard, wood and agricultural residue into ethanol, hydrogen, ammonia and electricity. The company said it wouldn't take the \$33-million federal grant that would have helped build the plant because the risks outweighed "any reasonably anticipated benefits for Alico."

Ethanol, meanwhile, isn't immune from the normal hiccups that accompany any startup industry. United States Envirofuels, holder of a \$7-million state grant, encountered opposition from a neighboring community to its plans to build a \$60-million sweet sorghum ethanol refinery in Highlands County. Brad Krohn, the company's president, says he will now build at a location near the one originally proposed.

Similar siting problems are likely all over Florida. Transporting the source crop for ethanol to the refinery drives up its costs, so Florida will need a score or more of small refineries scattered throughout the state to efficiently exploit timberland as an ethanol source.

And just because a technology carries a "green" label doesn't mean local residents will welcome an ethanol refinery. "It's a big boondoggle," says Joy Towles Ezell, a Taylor County farm owner and president of the Florida League of Conservation Voters and a member of the suspended Florida chapter of the Sierra Club, which opposed agrifuels. She says biofuel production is polluting

and unsustainable and biofuel crop maximization is bad for soils and water supplies. The national organization shut down the Florida chapter this year, with the suspension attributed variously to internal troubles within the Florida chapter and its tougher stance on fuel crops than the national group.

The division over biofuels among the environmentally minded extends beyond the Sierra Club's intramural squabble. The Nature Conservancy's Richard Hilsenbeck, associate director of protection, generally favors cellulosic ethanol. He reasons that by keeping the timber industry prosperous, Florida will see fewer treetops giving way to rooftops. Audubon of Florida policy director Eric Draper says his organization supports renewable energy. But his group worries that the state's 10% mandate will mean more corn ethanol, which it objects to, and importing Brazilian ethanol, which is currently kept out by tariffs. Draper says it will also create incentives for growers to switch to fast-growing trees at the expense of water resources and forest diversity. "For us, the jury's out until we see if the source works," he says.

Draper notes the number of lobbyists in the last legislative session representing interests that stand to gain from the energy bill; he wonders about a green bubble and the state spending. "It's a question of how much money government is going to throw at this stuff before they realize it doesn't work," he says. "We're chasing the energy solution and postponing the hard discussion on the real solution, which is conservation and efficiency."

Ethanol's difficulties also prompt other questions: If ethanol, which has been around as vehicle fuel for more than 100 years, is so difficult to pull off, how tough will it be to achieve Crist's other energy goals? Specifically, Crist wants Florida's utilities by 2025, when its population is projected to be north of 23 million, to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels, when the state's population was 13 million.

But with the state and federal government dictating ethanol use, an ethanol process doesn't have to prove cheaper, more efficient or more environmentally friendly than gas; it just has to prove superior to the other alternatives to meet the government-required demand. "Congress in its wisdom has said we're going to have 36 billion gallons of this stuff no matter what the cost," says Princeton's Searchinger.

And so it's inevitable that Florida entrepreneurs and researchers will continue to chase ethanol development. Ingram says that once ground is broken on his Florida plant it will take two years to build. He's convinced that a few months of operation will prove cellulosic ethanol's economic and technologic viability. Others then will see the investment risk of building more as worthwhile, he says. "The technology is there. The hang-up is in building the first one."

Reality Check

Ethanol Source: Citrus Waste If the shrinking citrus industry reverts to historic volumes, citrus waste could produce 90 million gallons of ethanol that's enough, at Florida's rate of fuel consumption, for 38 days' worth of ethanol, assuming the state has moved to a 10%-ethanol, 90%-gasoline mix. If cars burned 100% ethanol, citrus waste could generate enough ethanol to

replace gasoline for just under four days. "You're not going to solve our fuel problem with citrus waste," says USDA researcher Bill Widmer. Clewiston based Citrus Energy has a \$2.5-million grant to build a 4-million gallon ethanol refinery.

USDA researcher Bill Widmer ["Starter Fuel," May 2006, FloridaTrend.com] is among the few researchers who have developed reliable numbers on the cost. He has been working for four years at reducing the cost of turning citrus waste to ethanol, building off research dating to the early 1990s. Widmer, of the USDA's agriculture research service citrus lab in Winter Haven, says that four years ago the enzymes needed to convert citrus waste to a fermentable sugar cost \$12 to \$15 per gallon, which would make \$4-a-gallon gas a bargain. While he still has processing issues to resolve, he now has the enzyme cost down to just 80 to 90 cents per gallon. While that's "still quite expensive," he says, it has made citrus-waste ethanol "more than" price competitive with corn-based ethanol after the value of co-products such as limonene, which is used as a food additive and as a solvent, is included.

In theory, at least. Currently, citrus waste is made into animal feed. Now, just as the ethanol arithmetic has started to make economic sense, the rising price of corn has driven the price of animal feed upward, making citrus waste more attractive in the short term financially for growers to sell as a feed source. "We still have a ways to go in improving the economics for producing ethanol from citrus processing waste to prove there would be a clear advantage making the conversion (from animal feed production) to produce ethanol," Widmer says.

Hurricane Bertha news

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Latest Associated Press report

Hurricane Bertha may weaken within a few days

MIAMI — Forecasters say Hurricane Bertha could begin to weaken within the next couple of days.

As of 5 a.m. EDT Tuesday, the center of the storm was about 675 miles east-northeast of the northern Leeward Islands and about 1,035 miles southeast of Bermuda.

Maximum sustained winds are near 120 mph with some higher gusting. The Category 3 storm is headed to the northwest at about 10 mph.

Palm Beach Post coverage

Sun makes appearance, but rain still on tap in Palm Beaches, Treasure Coast

The word "sunny" has crept into the National Weather Service forecast for Palm Beach County, as in "partly sunny."

That isn't the all-clear. Isolated showers and thunderstorms are expected this afternoon from Palm Beach to the Treasure Coast. But chances of rain are down to between 30 percent and 40 percent.

Meanwhile, Hurricane Bertha is churning fiercely in the Atlantic, as a category three storm with winds near 120 mph. It still appears that it will turn to the north and remain out to sea.

Growth, pollution among the leading killers of Florida's reefs

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Palm Beach Post - Online

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FORT LAUDERDALE Half of America's reefs, particularly those adjacent to population areas, such as Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast, are in 'poor' or 'fair' condition, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said today.

The 569-page status report on reefs across the United States, the first by NOAA in three years, was released at the International Reef Symposium, meeting this week on the American mainland for the first time in three decades.

Population growth, overuse, overfishing and pollution have severely damaged Florida's reef system, the world's third largest and the only barrier reef system in North America. It stretches from the Dry Tortugas, south of Key West, north to the St. Lucie Inlet, and accounts for some 84 percent of the nation's reef habitat. A study by Nova Southeastern University, based in nearby Davie and the symposium's local organizer, has shown reefs account for 60,000 jobs and a \$6 billion economic impact in southern Florida alone. 'We haven't seen significant changes in coral cover in southeast Florida in the last five years,' Chantal Collier of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the author of the report's chapter on that region, said today. 'But we have very low coral cover in this region to begin with.' The southeast Florida reef, from the upper keys to the St. Lucie Inlet, encompasses a third of Florida's reefs but has gotten less attention than the reefs of the middle and lower keys, NOAA said. That has 'markedly increased in the last few years,' NOAA's report said. But, the report concluded, 'the unprecedented development of southeast Florida and the multiple pressures from its growing urban population continue to outpace environmental protection efforts at federal, state, local and citizen levels.' This afternoon, Gov. Charlie Crist will sign the Ocean Outfall Bill, passed in May. It requires the dumping of 300 million gallons a day of domestic wastewater be reduced dramatically by 2018 and eliminated by 2025. 'We must act as responsible and respectable stewards,' U. S. Rep. Ron Klein (D-Boca Raton) told the meeting. 'If not, history will remember us as the irresponsible generation that allowed their destruction. Which we're not going to do.' This morning, Klein presented a \$1.1 million federal check to the National Coral

Reef Institute and the Climate Change Research Initiative.

Also, bills now in Congress would reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act, would pay for more monitoring and enforcement of protections. They include research on ocean acidification and its impact on reefs. 'This message that coral reefs are in trouble is out there and people are acting on it,' Kacky Andrews, manager of NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program, said at the NOAA news briefing.

More than 2,500 people from more than 100 countries are attending the 11th reef symposium. It has been held every four years since 1969. This year is the International Year of the Reef; the last such 'year' was in 1997. 'We are clearly at a crossroads for coral reefs,' Richard Aronson, President of the International Society of Reef Studies, told the opening session. 'We're going to hear some more bad news at this meeting. But the next few years are going to determine if it's thumbs up or thumbs down,' Aronson said. 'We have to stay positive, positive, positive, in our outlook, no matter how bleak things look.' Worldwide, scientists say, more than one-fifth of the world's reefs already are believed lost and scientists predict another fourth will vanish in the next three decades if human impacts aren't lessened. The Caribbean has suffered 'major insults,' with bleaching and disease killing 90 percent of the coral reefs in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands alone in nine months, according to NOAA marine biologist Jenny Waddell.

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Palm Beach County wants to slow the spread of green iguanas

07/07/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Josh Hafenbrack

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Josh Hafenbrack-South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Arnold Kravetz's Boca Pointe home has been overrun by a parade of unwelcome, misbehaved visitors. They eat the annuals out of his garden, scale his patio screen enclosure and leave droppings in his swimming pool.

They're green iguanas, those ubiquitous, unsightly reptiles that scarf down flower beds, sun on pool decks and drive family dogs to distraction throughout South Florida. 'They're a menace, that's all I can say,' said Kravetz, 71, of West Boca. He said the iguanas started hanging around after Hurricane Wilma in 2005. Today, joins a growing campaign to try to slow the spread of iguanas, although state wildlife officials caution their numbers have swelled too much to ever be eradicated. County commissioners will ask the state Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to add green iguanas to the list of 'reptiles of concern,' a designation that requires iguana owners to pay a \$100 annual permit and have microchips implanted in them. Like almost anyone in South

Florida, county commissioners tell of their own encounters with the reptiles. Jeff Koons said a 5-foot iguana has taken up residence in his daughter's backyard. Bob Kanjian was surrounded by 25 or 30 of them during a recent round of golf.

Five-feet long, leathery-skinned and skilled at adapting to their suburban surroundings, the iguanas native to Central and South America first came to Miami-Dade County in 1966. Spread by hurricanes and pet owners who release them when they grow too big to handle, the iguanas number too many in South Florida and the Keys for officials to count.

But that doesn't mean iguanas are ripe to be tagged 'reptiles of concern,' said Scott Hardin, exotic species coordinator for the fish and wildlife commission. That designation is left for pythons that grow to 12 feet long, anacondas and an aggressive, 7-foot lizard called the Nile Monitor. By contrast, green iguanas eat only plants and pose no apparent threat to the ecosystem, he said.

Despite today's County Commission vote, people still have few options when iguanas invade.

County animal control officers won't bother with them. The only options to deal with iguanas but still comply with animal cruelty laws: grab a pellet gun or a water hose and take aim, hire a pricey private trapper or learn to coexist with the reptiles. 'There's nothing you can spray down or magic elixir that's going to make the iguanas go away,' said Todd Axten, who runs pest control at Critter Control of Delray Beach. His company charges a \$299 flat rate to trap as many iguanas as they can catch in a week.

For Kravetz's part, he complained to his community association, wrote to his county commissioner and called county animal control, to no avail. He's weighing a last-ditch option: putting poison in his flower bed, although he said he doesn't want to kill the iguanas.

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Will oysters and clams help keep Indian River Lagoon clean?

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Zach Smith - Stuart News

The Jensen Beach Mosquito Impoundment on Hutchinson Island may soon be home to a new facility that could enhance the water quality in the Indian River Lagoon and help offset recent staff reductions at Martin County Mosquito Control.

The county purchasing department has issued a request for proposal seeking a contractor to experiment with raising native clams and oysters at the north end of the impoundment's southern cell for the next five years.

In exchange for the opportunity, the contractor must agree to manage some of the daily operations at the impoundment, such as minor pump maintenance. The contractor will also be required to record observations on the mosquito population, wildlife and water quality in the impoundment.

Martin County Mosquito Control administrator Gene Lemire said the county's main hope is the shelled creatures improve water quality in the impoundment basin.

Clams and oysters are known to manage water quality through a process known as 'filter feeding.'

The aquatic animals consume plankton, algae and other nutrients by sucking in water, trapping food and expelling the water.

But while taking in food, they also remove pollutants from the water, making any toxins harmless as they are digested and expelled as feces.

Some kinds of oysters can filter close to 100 gallons of water a day, said Leslie Sturmer, a University of Florida Aquaculture Extension agent.

If the shellfish can be successfully reared, the county may consider seeding other areas of the lagoon. Officials believe the growth of clams and oysters in other areas could help with water quality monitoring and restore the lagoon's ecosystem.

Lemire said a recent resurgence of oysters in the lagoon is a welcome sign indicating water quality is improving.

The nursery facility will use floating docks, and the contractor will be responsible for removing debris at the site as well as obtain the necessary permitting. The contractor will pay for all installation and operating costs of the facility and be able to harvest the shellfish for profit.

In-kind services the contractor must agree to perform could save Mosquito Control at least three hours of work per day and three days of inspections per week, the request for proposal says.

Lemire said proposals will first pass through a special selection committee and then be forwarded to the County Commission for final approval.

Proposals can be submitted to the Martin County Purchasing Division until July 16.

