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Officials discuss U.S. Sugar/Glades deal

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Water managers plan to discuss the state's \$1.75 billion proposed deal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. in the Everglades, taking nearly 300 square miles out of agriculture for wetlands restoration.

The South Florida Water Management District will update its board on the deal at a meeting Wednesday.

The deal has been hailed by environmentalists as a huge step forward for Everglades restoration, bogged down for years by bureaucracy, funding shortfalls and missteps.

But many residents of Clewiston, where U.S. Sugar is based, aren't happy with the deal. They say if U.S. Sugar leaves and the state offers no assistance, the community could face economic collapse.

A cadre of concerned residents planned to attend Wednesday's meeting.

County backs plan for 'inland port' in the Glades

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WEST PALM BEACH Palm Beach County commissioners on Tuesday endorsed a plan to develop an industrial complex on roughly 3,500 acres south of Lake Okeechobee, despite environmentalists' concerns that the plan could interfere with Everglades restoration.

Without the endorsement, commissioners feared the project might be lost to Martin or Hendry counties, and the Glades region would miss out on thousands of jobs the project is expected to bring. Leaders in both Martin and Hendry have expressed interest in attracting the so-called inland port. 'If we want to lose it, we can procrastinate,' Commissioner Burt Aaronson said.

After nearly three hours of discussion, the commission voted 5-2, with Jess Santamaria and Karen Marcus dissenting, to have county planners begin working on rules changes that could allow the inland port to rise along U.S. 27. It would go somewhere between the Glades cities and a 9,000-acre site that sugar company Florida Crystals owns.

Commissioners opted against singling out Florida Crystals' property for the port, saying that would be preferential treatment. Santamaria said it would also increase the value of the company's property. 'We might be hurting the Glades by raising the price of this piece of land,' he said. Ultimately, it will be up to the Port of Palm Beach to decide where the complex should be built. Advocates envision the project as a landlocked hub of warehouses and related businesses, collecting and distributing goods from coastal ports throughout South and Central Florida.

Hundreds of Glades resident packed the commission chambers, including many who took buses from Belle Glade and Pahokee. Most wore red, white and black T-shirts with the message: 'Save our Jobs. Save our Communities. Inland port in the Glades.' Some had to watch the proceedings from the lobby because of the overflow crowd. 'We have got families now commuting to to work minimum-wage jobs,' said South Bay Mayor Shirley Walker Turner, one of dozens to appear before the commissioners. 'They are not earning the money that they so dearly deserve. We need to try to keep our families together and keep our people home.' Most pointed to the state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp., which would cost the region thousands of jobs in the coming years. An inland port, supporters say, would replace those jobs and bring much-needed economic development to the area. 'This inland port is like when you are sick and you need a blood transfusion,' Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said.

But environmentalists urged commissioners to delay their decision until November, when the South Florida Water Management District is expected to complete the U.S. Sugar buyout.

The water district has declined to take a stand on the port proposal. But the activists said Florida Crystals' land sits in the middle of a potential pathway for restoration, which could re-create the historic flow of water from the lake to the Everglades.

Drew Martin, a Sierra Club activist from Lake Worth, said putting the port on Florida Crystals' land - as state transportation planners have said they prefer - would enrich the company without giving the Glades residents the gains they're being promised. 'I'm sorry they're being offered a lot of false hope,' said Martin, one of about a dozen activists who were initially locked out of the commission chambers because of the large crowd. 'I am very sympathetic to the people of the Glades, and I am sorry they are being used as pawns.'

Forget a 2008 deadline to close U.S. Sugar deal

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The state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar may be a good deal or a bad deal, but at least the state won't be rushed to a decision.

Carol Wehle is the executive director of the South Florida Water Management District. The district is the proposed buyer of Florida's largest cane grower, a privately held company. Sources have told The Post that U.S. Sugar wants to complete the deal by the end of the year, in case Washington changes the capital-gains tax rate next year. But in an interview Monday, Ms. Wehle said, 'I don't see us closing by the end of the year.' She's correct, and no amount of pressure should bind the state to a year-end deadline.

The district and U.S. Sugar announced the proposal on June 23. The water district board approved a 75-day period for contract negotiations. Those 75 days expired this week. Ms. Wehle had hoped that the first details would be ready for today's meeting of the board, and that the board would vote on a contract in November. But there will be no contract details today, which is only one reason to junk the idea of completing the deal in 2008.

Not surprisingly, the district's review is taking longer than anticipated. 'Our original deadlines are blown,' Ms. Wehle said. And as she noted, the water district has a 'sobering fiduciary responsibility' to the public in reviewing the deal, given its price and impact.

Today, district board members will hear 'nothing about the terms of the deal,' Ms. Wehle said. They will hear from the consultants who are reviewing different parts of the deal: the condition of U. S. Sugar's nearly 200,000 acres; the value of the land; the condition of the company's sugar mill, railroad system and machinery; the finances; and the options for Everglades restoration. Ms. Wehle acknowledges that it may be a very long time before the district knows how the deal would mesh with

Everglades restoration: 'We still have to formulate how we will get water to the Everglades.' So at this point, the public isn't close to knowing whether the state would get a suitable return on a potential investment of almost \$2 billion. The public still doesn't know if the district can finance the deal. One variable is how much of U.S. Sugar the water district might sell. The district won't want a sugar mill or sugar harvesters or a citrus processing plant or a railroad. The district might sell some land to another sugar grower. 'We will keep what we need,' Ms. Wehle said, 'and spin the rest off.' She said the district already has received many offers for the company's assets. Another reason not to rush is that while the water district board will have the last word, the board won't have the only word. Only the taxpayers in the water district's 16 counties would be paying for U.S. Sugar, but there is obvious statewide interest. The Legislature will want to comment on any contract. Members of the state congressional delegation complained to The Tampa Tribune about not being kept up to date on the negotiations. Washington is supposed to be paying half the cost of Everglades restoration. 'They should start hearing answers today,' Ms. Wehle said. Also, 'there should be more opportunities for the public to comment than just the board meeting. ... It is healthy for people to ask questions about a project with such impact.' Those questions matter more than any deadline. With \$2 billion at stake, the first priority for Ms. Wehle is to find out if the deal makes sense. Because of a clerical error, The Post Sunday misspelled the name of the writer of a letter to the editor. The retired ambassador who wrote about the conflict between Russia and Georgia is Frank McNeil.

