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Editorial: Buying land from U.S. Sugar right decision

The disagreements were sharp and the opposition impassioned, but the South Florida Water Management District did the right thing Tuesday when it voted 4-3 to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar for use in restoring the Everglades.

This is very good news for Lee County. It offers the promise that, with the new land and other acreage secured through land swaps, a more natural southern flowway can be created for excess water from Lake Okeechobee to be stored and filtered.

That water, laden with agricultural pollutants, has been dumped in high-water years into the Caloosahatchee River, with devastating impact on the river and its priceless coastal estuary. The same happened to the St. Lucie estuary on the east coast.

But it also can mean the revival of Everglades National Park, Florida Bay and the Florida Keys - the entire battered natural system of South Florida, and the recreational and tourist economy based on it.

The \$1.34 billion purchase is not a done deal; the board gave itself an escape clause if financing proves too difficult. There are also questions about spending so much when the state is strapped for cash, about whether the price is too high and a sweetheart deal for U.S. Sugar, about whether other agribusinesses will agree to land swaps needed for the flowway, and about the impact on the economy of the lake region and about whether there will be enough money left to actually implement restoration. Growing criticism of the deal forced Gov. Charlie Crist to intervene to save it.

But the cost of this purchase - maybe \$3.25 billion including interest or more, will be spread out over decades and the benefits over centuries.

The economy of the lake region will need help, but what it needs most of all is a new economy that doesn't rely on maintaining farming in a marsh, the natural functions of which are more economically important to the state than these crops.

The U.S. Sugar purchase is visionary, and like most visionary projects it raises plenty of concerns.

But our current economic woes will pass. What we must not miss is this great chance to restore the environment.