

# Crist Puts Name On Line With Huge Deal

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A decade from now Gov. [Charlie Crist](#) will be credited with either overseeing the greatest conservation achievement in Florida history or orchestrating one of biggest boondoggles ever foisted on taxpayers.

We trust it will be the former, but the deal approved Tuesday by the [South Florida Water District governing board](#) to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar for \$1.34 billion is going to need to be monitored closely.

The land sits between [Lake Okeechobee](#) and Everglades National Park. It will be used to build huge reservoirs that will hold and filter polluted water before it flows on to the Everglades and Florida Bay. Restoring and cleaning its connection to Okeechobee should save the Everglades. And the acquisition should allow the water district to put a halt to the flow of polluted agricultural water to estuaries on both coasts.

Yet one can't help but be uneasy about the deal, which Crist announced last summer after secretly negotiating with the sugar company. It will be funded by the property taxes already levied by the South [Florida Water Management District](#) in the 16 counties where it manages water policies. It's not clear there is enough money to fund the purchase and the district's other chores.

Only about 100,000 acres may be needed for the reservoir. The price, some appraisers say, is high. And the state plans to lease much of the agricultural land back to the company for \$50 an acre, well below market value, for seven years.

And if state and [federal governments](#) fail to fulfill their promise to fund a comprehensive plan to restore the Everglades, then the purchase could end up being a monumental blunder, one that will forever taint Crist's legacy.

An attorney for [Florida Crystals](#) Corp., which opposed the deal and has its own interest in the land, told the [South Florida Water](#) District Board: "You're buying land to be a landlord to U.S. Sugar at subsidized prices."

We're hopeful that won't be the case. No deal is perfect, and the opportunity to buy such a tract is rare. Failure to obtain this key piece to the Everglades restoration puzzle could have doomed the River of Grass, which is critical to South Florida's water supply and the health of Florida Bay, even the reefs of Florida Keys.

As a scientist Thomas Van Lent, a scientist for the Everglades Foundation, put it, "The really risky vote is a no vote."

Moreover, the district added a provision that would allow the district to back out of the expenditure if it would compromise its ability to manage water supply and maintain flood control. It also refused to allow U.S. Sugar to lease 7,000 acres south of [Lake Okeechobee](#) to a rock-mining company.

Sugar company workers rightly worry about the loss of jobs, but no fields will be taken out of production for at least seven years. And the restoration work is going to create a lot of construction jobs and eventually should boost the tourism industry in the area.

Crist, who has a good record for both fiscal and environmental stewardship, has put his good name on the line with the largest land deal in state history.

We trust he knows what he got himself and the state into.