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## **‘First Mondays’ discusses obstacles facing Everglades restoration, U.S. Sugar purchase**

01/08/2009  
Island Sand Paper  
JANE BRICKLEY

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‘First Mondays’ discusses obstacles facing Everglades restoration, U.S. Sugar purchase

By JANE BRICKLEY, [jbrickley@breezenewspapers.com](mailto:jbrickley@breezenewspapers.com)

During the Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation's "First Mondays: Policy at SCCF" presentation for the month of January, SCCF Natural Resource Policy Director Rae Ann Wessel continued her series on the essentials for the restoration of South Florida's rivers, lakes and the Everglades by focusing the discussion how to remove obstacles in order to restore flow in the Everglades and how the U.S. Sugar land purchase will be essential in restoration.

Wessel emphasized the fact that even though we live on the west coast, restoring the Everglades and the water system that feeds Florida's southern bodies of water to healthier states will consequentially improve the health of the Caloosahatchee and therefore, to a certain extent, improve our coastal waters.

Wessel explained that the water that flows into the Everglades, and the beginning of this large and complex water system, originates in Orlando near Disney World and ends with Lake Okeechobee.

Out of Okeechobee, to the west, flows the Caloosahatchee and to the east flows the St. Lucie, Wessel said, noting that 70 percent of the water discharged from Lake Okeechobee flows through the Caloosahatchee and the St. Lucie takes a majority of the remainder, leaving virtually no water to flow down into the Everglades.

"These two river and estuary systems that were never historically connected to Lake Okeechobee, today are doing a disservice in taking care of all the excess water that's being created in this system," Wessel said.

Also affected by this lack of water and lack of water quality are Biscayne Bay, coastal wetlands, Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, Wessel noted.

"All of these systems are connected and affected by the alterations to this system," she said.

Wessel focused most of her presentation on obstacles blocking the flow of water south to what remains of the Everglades.

Historically, the area right below Okeechobee was the Everglades and "Today, 7,000 acres of [this] area is what we call the Everglades Agricultural Area," Wessel said.

Historically, 99 percent of the water discharged from Lake Okeechobee would flow down to the south of the lake through a sawgrass plain. It then flows into the ridge and slough system, into the 10,000 Islands and then into Florida Bay, noted Wessel, adding that as of today, we have lost more than half of this historic Everglades system.

Wessel went into further detail by describing certain areas affected by this altered system, including Everglades National Park.

Since its creation in 1947, Everglades National Park has decreased in area to less than half of its original size.

"There has been a 90 percent loss of wading bird habitat and populations. Sixty-eight species of plants and animals are threatened or endangered with extinction, including the Florida panther, the American crocodile, wood storks, snail kites and Cape Sable seaside sparrows," Wessel explained, noting that the Everglades are also crucial in protecting our own coastal estuaries and waters. "This area is today recognized as a wetland of international importance and that's one of the reasons why we talk about it so much. That's one of the reasons we try to improve it. It is unlike anything else in the world."

Wessel said that in order to improve this greater Everglades ecosystem, and in turn improve our own water systems, we must improve water quality, quantity, timing and the distribution of water, which is possible through Decentralization (DECOMP) and Modified Water Delivery (Mod Waters) projects that relate to essential fixes that are needed in order to restore flow to the Everglades.

According to Wessel, proponents of Everglades restoration can move beyond older and potentially ineffectual solutions, such as Aquifer Storage and Recovery plans (ASR) and the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), in favor of new options.

"We've never had this opportunity to talk about restoring flow south through the EAA until this past June when it was revealed that Governor Crist was working with U.S. Sugar and a few other people to negotiate an opportunity to buy U.S. Sugar out," Wessel added.

"The Lee County portion of the purchase of this would be about \$300 million," said Pete Quasius of the Audubon Society of Southwest Florida, who was seated in the audience. "Our annual county school budget is \$3 billion. So in many respects, this purchase is not a huge investment for Lee County. We're having all the other counties in the water management district contribute to this purchase as we have contributed to the purchase of all the other projects over the years. For Lee County, even for the west coast, this is a real bargain."

Overall, this land purchase will remove an obstacle to restoration, creating another outlet for water from Lake Okeechobee, eliminate 85 percent of excess water flows through the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, achieve what CERP could not and give supporters a fresh look at projects and alternatives to restoration.

Wessel also noted that grasping the content presented in the First Monday lectures will be essential to those planning to attend the Water Issues conference at BIG ARTS on Tuesday, Feb. 17.

The next "First Mondays" presentation will be held at SCCF, located at 3333 Sanibel-Captiva Road, on Monday, Feb. 2 starting at 10 a.m.

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## Florida Everglades land deal faces another challenge

01/08/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

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Another legal hurdle emerged this week to the state's proposed \$1.34 billion land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

Florida Crystals, U.S. Sugar's chief competitor, on Tuesday filed a request for an administrative hearing to challenge the sale of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land to the state for Everglades restoration.

U.S. Sugar would lease its land back for at least seven years, which Florida Crystals argues gives its competitor an unfair business advantage funded by South Florida taxpayers.

Florida Crystals has already challenged the funding plan for what would be the largest public land buy in state history.

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## Florida Crystals steps up attack on proposed land deal

01/08/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

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Florida Crystals Corp. has widened its assault on the state's proposed \$1.34 billion land deal with chief rival U.S. Sugar Corp.

Crystals this week filed a second legal challenge to the deal, an administrative complaint against the South Florida Water Management District.

The challenge comes weeks after the district's governing board voted to buy nearly all of the sugar giant's farmland, roughly 180,000 acres. Gov. Charlie Crist wants the water agency to use it for Everglades restoration, perhaps by restoring the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee south into the Everglades.

But Florida Crystals wants an administrative law judge to kill the deal on the grounds that the billion-dollar-plus price tag would force the water agency to abandon other Everglades projects already under way. It criticizes the U.S. Sugar deal as a land grab with 'no stated public purpose that is feasible,' said Gaston Cantens, a Crystals vice president. 'In essence, by going through with this purchase, they're not going to be able to do any projects,' Cantens said. In a statement, the water district said it was 'reviewing the petition' from Florida Crystals.

The challenge calls the deal an 'improper and ill-conceived use of public funds to subsidize' U.S. Sugar that is 'cloaked under the guise of environmental restoration.' 'At best, any public purpose is incidental and speculative,' the complaint reads.

In December, Crystals used similar arguments in a court challenge to the district's effort to obtain bond financing.

This latest challenge adds to the cacophony of criticism from U.S. Sugar competitors, who fear the deal will give the struggling, 77-year-old sugar company a competitive edge. The deal calls for allowing U.S. Sugar to lease back the land at a quarter of the market rate to keep farming for seven years - and perhaps longer if the district delays breaking ground on restoration projects.

The Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, a group of small and medium-sized farmers that collectively make up the state's third-largest sugar producer, said such favorable terms would turn U.S. Sugar into a 'super competitor.' Environmental supporters of the governor's plan charge that Crystals wants to wreck the deal so it can move in and buy U.S. Sugar at a discount.

