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Everglades land deal in jeopardy from competition

02/24/2009

Associated Press (AP)
SKOLOFF, BRIAN

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WEST PALM BEACH, Florida_A historic land deal aimed at helping restore the dying Florida Everglades may end up dead in the water.

The state of Florida is currently working to secure financing so it can buy 180,000 acres (72,800 hectares) of land in the Everglades wetlands from U.S. Sugar Corp., the largest U.S. producer of cane sugar, for \$1.34 billion.

The company agreed last year to sell its nearly 300 square miles (800 square kilometers) of farmland to Florida, which wants to use some of it for environmental restoration and do away with acres of agriculture that have long been blamed for polluting the Everglades ecosystem.

In the meantime, U.S. Sugar is still entertaining bids from competitors, putting the state deal in jeopardy.

A 60-day period during which U.S. Sugar was required to take bids _ and could seek out bids _ ended Monday. However, the company can continue to entertain unsolicited bids until the state secures financing, something officials say they hope to happen by summer.

"We have several interested parties," said U.S. Sugar Vice President Robert Coker, who declined to name them.

One is a Tennessee-based farming company, The Lawrence Group, that is seeking to undercut the state contract.

"It's a very active time right now," Coker said. "If an offer is better than the state's, then the state will have an opportunity to come back in and match that offer. If they choose not to match that offer, then we can pay a breakup fee and walk away."

That means U.S. Sugar, under the terms of a contract signed last year with the state, pays \$40 million and the much-hyped deal is off.

Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation, said he believes the deal will eventually go through, but predicted dire consequences if it doesn't.

"If a third party buys U.S. Sugar and undercuts the state, in all likelihood, the opportunity to restore the Everglades as we've envisioned here might be forever lost," Fordham said. "It's possible that any new land owner could conceivably chop it up for development, rock mining and other agricultural purposes that would leave Everglades restoration in the dust."

For its part, The Lawrence Group has said it would work with the state to sell some land needed for restoration, while keeping jobs

and farmland in production.

The South Florida Water Management District, charged with overseeing Everglades restoration, said their agency remains committed to the deal. State officials did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

"The district has a contract with U.S. Sugar and is moving forward with the responsibilities under the terms of the contract," the agency said in a statement. "The district is not a party to discussions with other groups. At this point, speculation would be premature."

Under the proposal, the state would buy U.S. Sugar's land, but the company would keep its assets, including its mill, railroad lines and citrus processing plant.

U.S. Sugar would be allowed to lease back the farmland at \$50 per acre annually for seven years or more before turning it over to the state.

Florida Crystals, the state's second largest sugar producer, has fought the state deal at every turn, claiming that the lease deal is below market value and gives an unfair business advantage to its competitor.

However, at the same time, Florida Crystals is in talks with U.S. Sugar to potentially purchase its assets, but only if a large chunk of the land is left in agriculture.

The state has yet to lay out a definitive proposal for all the property.

"It all comes down to one number, and that number is how much land are you going to leave in production," said Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens. "If you don't have sugar cane to feed the mill, then the mill shuts down."

Cantens said his company has no interest in trying undercut the state contract, and would never pay \$1.34 billion for U.S. Sugar, as the state intends. He also said Florida Crystals is prepared to work with the state on any land swaps that may be needed for restoration efforts.

However, if the state deal fails, Cantens said, Florida Crystals may be interested.

"There isn't a sugar asset in the world that we wouldn't consider buying," he said.

As for the current deal, Cantens said, "We're adamantly opposed," citing a land leaseback rate "that is well below market ... That is just wrong."

Lawmakers and other sugar growers in the region have also questioned the state deal, citing the high cost to taxpayers and what some see as the unfair competitive edge to U.S. Sugar.

U.S. Sugar Corp.: <http://www.ussugar.com/>

Florida Crystals: <http://www.floridacrystals.com/>

South Florida Water Management District: <http://www.sfwmd.gov/>

Everglades Foundation: <http://www.evergladesfoundation.org/>

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Why the U.S. Sugar land buy is wise

02/24/2009

Miami Herald

GUEST, DAVID

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The Feb. 7 Miami Herald story on the purchase of U.S. Sugar lands for Everglades restoration detailed the controversy surrounding this mammoth conservation land buy. Readers may find themselves asking themselves: Is it worth the headaches and the cost to buy this huge chunk of South Florida land?

Quite simply, it is cheaper, faster and smarter to buy U.S. Sugar's land than it is to spend taxpayer money on what engineers have been planning: giant pumps and pipes and waterworks to carry water around the industrial farm fields. Buying this vast tract between Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park is a better deal for taxpayers and a preferable way to put the Everglades back to rights.

And, as naysayers (mostly rival sugar companies and their surrogates) come out of the woodwork, it is worth once again asking: Why are we restoring the Everglades? First off, because it's the right thing to do, we're in the middle of doing it and we've already committed billions to make it happen. Second, because it will protect something priceless: South Florida's future clean drinking-water supplies.

Are some people queasy about doing business with Big Sugar? Yes. But the fact is that U.S. Sugar has the land in the right location, and the company is willing to sell the whole chunk at a price Florida is willing to pay. There are no comparable sales because there has never been a deal this big in state history.

Whenever leaders make a big, bold leap, critics follow, as they should in a democracy. But I think it's worth looking back to 1867, when the United States purchased the Alaska territory from Russia. Secretary of State William Seward had pushed for the deal, even though critics called it "Seward's Folly" and complained that the United States had foolishly bought a wasteland that would be difficult to defend against America's enemies. The New York Tribune called it "a frozen wilderness," and others derisively called it a "Polar Bear Garden" unsuitable for raising food and livestock.

In the 1917 book, *A History of the United States Since the Civil War*, Ellis Paxson Oberholtzer described the reaction:

"The purchase price was large; the annual charges for administration, civil and military, would be yet greater, and continuing. The territory included in the proposed cession was not contiguous to the national domain. It lay away at an inconvenient and a dangerous distance. The treaty had been secretly prepared, and signed and foisted upon the country at four o'clock in the morning. It was a dark deed done in the night. . . ." The New York World said that it was a "sucked orange." "It contained nothing of value but furbearing animals, and these had been hunted until they were nearly extinct. Except for the Aleutian Islands and a narrow strip of land extending along the southern coast, the country would be not worth taking as a gift."

In the last year of his life, someone asked Seward which of his public acts he believed would live longest in the memory of the American people. "The purchase of Alaska," he said. "But it will take another generation to find it out."

Seward's Day is now celebrated as a holiday in Alaska on the last Monday of March in honor of the purchase.

As someone who has been involved in protecting Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades for 25 years, I believe the purchase of U.S. Sugar's land will be seen as a historical landmark. Maybe one day we'll hold a holiday to celebrate how wise and bold Florida was to buy this land when opportunity came its way.

David Guest is an attorney for Earthjustice in Tallahassee. Earthjustice is a nonprofit organization dedicated to enforcing and strengthening environmental laws.

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U.S. Sugar board enacts 'poison pill' against hostile takeover

02/24/2009

Palm Beach Post

Salisbury, Susan

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Feb. 24--U.S. Sugar Corp.'s board of directors has taken action to protect the shareholders in the event of a hostile takeover, senior vice president Robert Coker said today.

"Our board has approved a stockholder rights plan that is intended to prevent any type of discriminatory treatment of any of our stockholders," Coker said. "The current environment we are in could give rise to those who have not participated in our 'go shop' period to attempt a hostile buyout."

The measure was intended to cover any potential bidders, including the Nashville, Tenn.-based Lawrence Group, which Coker said has sought to purchase U.S. Sugar, as well as any other group that might seek to acquire a majority of the company's stock.

The company has agreed to sell 180,000 acres of farmland to the South Florida Water Management District for Everglades restoration for \$1.34 billion.

Although the 60-day "go shop" period ended Monday, and attracted a number of participants, U.S. Sugar is willing to talk to others interested in purchasing its assets, Coker said.

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U.S. Sugar Corporation Declares Dividend Distribution of Stockholder Purchases

02/24/2009

PR Newswire

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CLEWISTON, Fla., Feb. 24 /PRNewswire/ -- The Board of Directors of United States Sugar Corporation declared the adoption of a Stockholder Rights Plan and a dividend distribution of one 'Purchase Right' for each outstanding share of its common stock.

'Basically the Stockholder Rights Plan and Purchase Right distribution are legal tools designed to assure that the Company's stockholders receive fair and equal treatment in the event of a hostile takeover of the Company,' said Robert Coker, senior vice president, public affairs.

'By hostile, I refer to a bidder who does not negotiate with our Board, who could offer only some of our stockholders a high price to gain control of U.S. Sugar and offer less to the remaining stockholders,' Coker said.

'It is not intended to deter or discourage bona fide offers and proposals that the Board in good faith determines are fair, advisable and in the best interests of all of the Company's stockholders,' Coker said.

'What happens with the Stockholder Rights Plan in place is that when someone buys 15% of U.S. Sugar's stock, the Board can

trigger an exchange of 'rights' for stock, in essence doubling the number of shares held by remaining shareholders. The hostile bidder does not receive the additional shares, and in this example, the 15% would be diluted to approximately 8%,' Coker said.

Coker said that shareholders and employees are being informed of the distribution in a letter accompanied by legal documents outlining the benefit.

'This action does not affect the number of shares or the value of shares a shareholder currently owns. It has no impact unless triggered by a hostile action,' said Coker.

'The whole purpose of the Stockholder Rights Plan is to allow the Board to properly exercise its fiduciary duties as it considers alternative transactions and to protect all stockholders from coercive and discriminatory takeover attempts,' Coker said.

On February 19, 2009, the Board of Directors of United States Sugar Corporation (the 'Company') declared a dividend distribution of one Preferred Share Purchase Right (a 'Right') for each outstanding share of its Series A Common Stock and Series B Common Stock (together, the 'Common Stock'). The Rights are designed to assure that each of the Company's stockholders receives fair and equal treatment in the event of any proposed unsolicited takeover of the Company, to guard against other abusive, coercive, manipulative and discriminatory takeover tactics, and to enhance the Board's ability to negotiate with prospective acquirers. It is not intended to deter or discourage bona fide offers and proposals which the Board in good faith determines are fair, advisable and in the best interests of all of the Company's stockholders.

If the Rights become exercisable, each Right initially would entitle stockholders to purchase one one-thousandth (1/1,000) of a share of the Company's newly created Series A Junior Participating Preferred Stock, at an initial exercise price of Three Hundred Nine Dollars and Zero Cents (\$309.00) in cash. In general, the Rights would become exercisable if a person or a group became the beneficial owner of 15% or more of the Company's outstanding Series A Common Stock or announced a tender offer which, if completed, would result in such person or group acquiring 15% or more of the Company's outstanding Series A Common Stock.

At any time after a person or group becomes the beneficial owner of 15% or more of the outstanding Series A Common Stock -- a 'triggering event' -- the Board could mandate the exchange of each outstanding Right for one share of Series A Common Stock (subject to pro rata adjustment for stock splits, dividends and like events) or other consideration as provided in the rights agreement. Upon the occurrence of a triggering event, all Rights held by the triggering person (and its affiliates and associates) would become void and would not be exercisable or exchangeable. The Board of Directors in general is entitled to redeem the Rights at one cent per Right or to modify or terminate the Rights at any time prior to a triggering event.

The dividend distribution of the Rights will be payable on February 24, 2009 to stockholders of record as of the close of business on February 24, 2009. The Rights will expire in two years, unless the

Rights are earlier redeemed by the Company or the Company amends the rights agreement to accelerate the expiration date. The Rights distribution is not taxable to stockholders.

Veteran journalist takes aim at Crist's budget

02/24/2009

Sarasota Herald-Tribune - Online
Staff Report

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Gary Fineout, a veteran reporter of the Florida Legislature, critiques Gov. Charlie Crist's budget. Fineout has started a blog about Florida politics. http://findout.typepad.com/the_fine_print/

Fineout will also be reporting for the Herald-Tribune during the upcoming legislative session.

Here is his blog: Ten things to know about Crist's budget

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist outlined his budget recommendations to state lawmakers on Friday - and most of the initial coverage focused on Crist's decision to utilize billions in expected federal stimulus money to shore up the \$66.5 billion spending plan.

But there's a quite a lot more to Crist's proposed budget than just his decision to utilize federal money. Here's a rundown of some other items worth noting.

1. Health insurance: The biggest perk in state government is left unchanged under Crist's budget proposal. Crist recommend spending \$13.1 million to keep health insurance premiums for state workers at their present level. But beyond that, Crist is keeping intact the free health insurance that state lawmakers and thousands of top ranking state workers receive.

2. School recognition grants: Despite the fact that Crist got criticized by George P. Bush last weekend, the Republican governor decided to keep intact funding for one of the key elements of former Gov. Jeb Bush's A+ education reforms. He has set aside \$206.7 million for the program that rewards schools that show learning gains based primarily on results from the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. It won't take long for Democrats, many of whom who praised Crist for his budget proposal, to start questioning why the Legislature should fund this program during a fiscal crisis. The GOP will assert that getting rid of this program will hurt teachers since much of the money winds up as bonuses.

3. Sweetener for the U.S. Sugar deal: Crist has included \$5 million in his economic development funding recommendations to be used for 'areas impacted by the South Florida Water Management District's acquisition of land from the U.S. Sugar Corporation. Impacted areas include Hendry and Glades County and the communities of Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee.' 4. Doctors and Medicaid providers are winners: Probably due in no small part to the influx of federal dollars, Crist has not only

recommended keeping Medicaid intact he recommended paying more to Medicaid dentists and physicians that specialize in dermatology, neurology and orthopedic surgery. Crist also recommended spending nearly \$800 million to rescue the state's Medically Needy and MEDS A/D program - which helps the disabled and elderly. Crist also recommended spending \$52 million more to add 46,000 children in the KidCare program.

5. Bright Futures tweak: There's a very small, yet potentially important tweak to the Bright Futures college scholarship program recommended by the governor. Crist put in a provision with the \$480.8 million appropriation for the popular program that would require students who receive the scholarship to fill out a complicated federal financial aid form known as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or Fafsa for short. The New York Times just recently detailed how complicated and intimidating the form can be. But for years there have been many who have wanted to know the income levels of those receiving Bright Futures, which is awarded based on high school grades and standardized test scores. Critics such as former University chancellor Charles Reed contended Bright Futures was nothing more than a wealth transfer from poor people who play the lottery to middle-class and rich families headed to college. There's never been any data, however, to fully back up that assertion.

6. End of Front Porch Florida?: A much smaller portion of the Bush legacy could be on the cutting block. Crist's budget appears to wipe out \$1.88 million for the program that Bush created to aid distressed communities across the state. It may not be a complete surprise: the Department of Community Affairs in its long-range plans notes that there have been challenges to the program due to funding cuts and 'vague statutory authority.' The DCA report notes the funding currently supports the operation of Front Porch offices across the state, as well as \$400,000 for employment internships for students living in the designated Front Porch communities and \$630,000 for community-based projects. There are Front Porch designated communities stretching from Pensacola to Opa-Locka.

7. A per-gallon fee on water production is a major policy shift: While some lawmakers have been filed bills to end the sales tax exemption on the sale of bottled water, Crist included a 6 cent a gallon fee on water producers that was called a 'new bottled water severance fee.' It won't take long for some companies to call this a tax, but the inclusion of this fee marks the first time the state has sought to charge a fee - excluding permit costs - to take water out of the ground.

8. Borrowing \$2.5 billion: That's the total amount of bonding that Crist has included in his budget proposal. It includes bonding to build new prison beds, Florida Forever land-buying program, Everglades restoration, \$400 million for Florida Turnpike construction projects, \$70 million for Sunshine Skyway bonds, and \$226 million to pay for the state's petroleum tank cleanup program. This amount of borrowing is higher than the Division of Bond Finance estimated would be authorized in the coming year. The state's total amount of borrowing in June 2008 was \$24.3 billion and the state now annually pays close to \$2 billion in debt service payments.

9. The Budget Stabilization Fund would remain as it is: Crist does

not recommend paying back any money to the constitutionally-mandated Budget Stabilization Fund in the coming year. It would stay at \$281.3 million. Likewise, Crist has made no plans to pay back the Lawton Chiles Endowment at this time.

10. Money for teachers, but not merit pay: Among the many items Crist recommended funding for was \$61.7 million for the state's excellent teacher program, which provide a bonus to those teachers who are nationally certified. But there doesn't appear to be any money for the heavily-criticized merit pay program even though the State Board of Education had asked for \$32 million and Crist has backed the concept of merit pay in the past.

DJ US Sugar's Board Adopts Anti-Takeover Measure -Report

02/25/2009

Dow Jones Commodities News Service

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Feb 25, 2009 (Dow Jones Commodities News via Comtex) -- DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

U.S. Sugar Corp.'s board Monday adopted an anti-takeover provision, drawing a rebuke from a Tennessee concern which has expressed an interest in the company, the Miami Herald reported Wednesday. The Lawrence Group said the measure is "part of a continuous effort" by U.S. Sugar to thwart its \$300 a share cash offer. The state of Florida has signed a \$1.3 billion contract to buy 180,000 acres owned by the company in the ecologically sensitive Everglades. According to earlier reports, Other possible purchasers were given a two-month period to make a better offer.

Full story at <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/southflorida/story/920166.html>

-Dow Jones Newswires; 201-938-5500

(END) Dow Jones Newswires

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THE EVERGLADES U.S. Sugar's 'poison pill' clause blocks takeovers

02/25/2009

Miami Herald

Morgan, Curtis

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The boardroom and backroom drama continues to churn behind Gov. Charlie Crist's \$1.34 billion land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp.

The sugar giant's board of directors, controlled by foundations and the descendants of its founder, adopted a "poison pill" provision on Monday intended to protect its financial interests and block hostile takeovers.

"I wouldn't use that phrase, but there are others who may look at this and come to the same conclusion," said Robert Coker, a senior vice president for U.S. Sugar.

Those others certainly included the Lawrence Group, a Tennessee-based concern that contends it can strike a cheaper Everglades restoration deal with the state.

The U.S. Sugar maneuver, which would dilute the value of any hostile bidders' shares, is a major hurdle to the company's most persistent suitor.

"It's part of a continuous effort by U.S. Sugar management to frustrate my clients' effort to make sure that shareholders get the best value," said Ron Book, The Lawrence Group's lobbyist.

U.S. Sugar's "shareholder rights plan" would work this way: Once a bidder acquired 15 percent of shares, the board could trigger an "exchange" that would double remaining shares and allow the board to retain majority control.

The impact on the landmark Everglades land buy is uncertain, at least so far.

But the move is aimed at keeping the company in the hands of directors who signed off on the state deal.

NOT PUBLICLY TRADED

U.S. Sugar employees and retirees own shares, which are not publicly traded, but the majority are controlled by foundations and relatives of Charles Stewart Mott, who made a fortune in the auto industry and bought the sugar grower in the 1920s.

Still, Coker said, there is a possibility of a competing bidder offering a better deal, which the state would have the right to match.

Coker said the company is simultaneously finalizing the state contract and negotiating with several private interests, including rival Florida Crystals, for all or parts of its sprawling empire.

BILLION-DOLLAR DEAL

If the deal survives, water managers plan to use much of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres for projects to store and clean water for the Everglades -- after leasing it back to the company for seven years or more.

The Lawrence Group, twice before blocked in takeover bids, had made no secret of intentions to make offers to smaller shareholders.

U.S. Sugar's board has not accepted its latest bid, \$300 a share, as valid.

The Lawrence Group's previous bids sparked a 2007 class-action lawsuit from former employees, alleging that U.S. Sugar's board rejected a purchase offer that would have paid them \$293 per share.

At that time, former employees were cashing out at \$200.

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U.S. Sugar braces for possible takeover

02/25/2009

Orlando Business Journal - Online

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U.S. Sugar Corp. appears to be bracing for a possible hostile takeover as it attempts to finalize the sale of more than 180,000 acres of land to the South Florida Water Management District for Everglades restoration.

The Clewiston-based company said its board of directors Feb. 24 had adopted a stockholder rights plan and a dividend distribution of one purchase right for each outstanding share of its common stock.

Robert Coker, U.S. Sugars senior vice president for public affairs, said the stockholder plan and purchase right distribution are legal tools designed to assure that stockholders receive fair and equal treatment in the event of a hostile takeover. We've never done anything like this before, but our company has never been in play for sale before, either, he said. There are many debates and discussions happening now about our company, and many people talking to the press. The Lawrence Group of Tennessee has been attempting to buy the company for years. Coker said its obvious from recent statements by the group that it is appealing directly to shareholders.

Coker has said previously that the Lawrence Group declined to sign a confidentiality agreement that would start a formal negotiation with U.S. Sugars board of directors.

U.S. Sugar recently concluded a 60-day go shop period for its assets, and it has acknowledged negotiations with competitor Florida Crystals and other suitors.

Coker said the term 'hostile takeover' refers to a bidder that does not negotiate with our board, that could offer a high price to certain stockholders to gain control of U.S. Sugar, while offering less to remaining stockholders.

The stockholder plan is not intended to deter or discourage bona fide offers and proposals that the board in good faith determines are fair, advisable and in the best interests of all of the company's stockholders, he said in a news release.

The company said the plan would be triggered if someone buys 15 percent of U.S. Sugars stock. It would allow the board of directors to initiate an exchange of rights for stock, in essence doubling the number of shares held by remaining shareholders. The hostile bidder would not receive the additional shares, and the hypothetical 15 percent would be diluted to about 8 percent, Coker said in the release.

U.S. Sugar stockholder groups include an employee stock ownership plan, historic owners from the Mott family in Michigan, and charities to which the Mott family donated shares.

Gov. Charlie Crist announced the states plans to purchase the land in June. In November, the water management district and U. S. Sugar concluded negotiations and settled on a purchase price of \$1.34 billion.

The deal included a lease-back of the land for \$50 an acre for a period covering seven crop cycles. The sugar mill, refinery and citrus processing facilities; railroads; office buildings; equipment and the Gilchrist County citrus nursery are to remain the property of U.S. Sugar.

In December, after months of negotiations, the water management districts board approved the deal.

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Editorial: Don't let sugar get away

02/26/2009

News-Press

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Editorial • February 26, 2009

Florida could blow a historic opportunity to repair grievous damage to its environment, damage that threatens Southwest Florida's economy.

That's if the state does not move aggressively to close its deal on 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. crop land in the Everglades.

A purchase contract has been negotiated and a sweet offer made by the state, \$1.34 billion. But despite the expiration of a 60-day period the company had to entertain other bids and could seek them out, U.S. Sugar is still free to entertain unsolicited bids so long as the state doesn't have its financing for the purchase secured.

That puts the pressure on the state to get things wrapped up quickly before the land is bought — or acquired through hostile takeover — by other agribusinesses who may or may not be amenable to selling enough land at the right price to make Everglades restoration possible.

The deal was supposed to be as good as done when it was announced last year. The state would buy U.S. Sugar's crop land and other assets in the Everglades Agricultural area south and east of Lake Okeechobee. Some land would eventually be used or swapped for land to create a southern flow way for excess lake water released in years of high water.

That would allow storing and filtering of the excess water, instead of its release in huge gobs west into the Caloosahatchee River. Laden with agricultural nutrients, that water has caused devastating algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee in recent years and upset the salinity that makes Lee County's coastal estuary a multi-billion-dollar asset for fishing and tourism.

At least two other agribusinesses are interested in the assets of U.S. Sugar. Both say they would work with the state to make land available for restoration. But that's a gamble we can't afford to take.

Our leaders in Tallahassee need to hear from us that we want the U.S. Sugar deal clinched, because it will be good for our environment and economy.

We're talking about the chance to reverse pollution and water conservation mistakes that have piled up for well over a century in South Florida.

We may never get this chance again.

Economy discussed on river cruise , Caloosahatchee River tour was sponsored by Riverwatch

02/26/2009

Glades County Democrat

Bolan, Nena

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Glades County Democrat GLADES/HENDRY -- Mem-bers of Riverwatch, SFWMD rep-resentatives, U.S. Senator Connie Mack's congressional aide and local government officials met at the LaBelle boat dock, Feb. 21. They went for a cruise along the Caloosahatchee River on the tour boat, Manatee.

It was a scenic, breezy setting for the meeting that gave updates on current issues of Everglades restoration and the anticipated buy out of United States Sugar Corporation by SFWMD. River-watch is an organization created for the benefi t of the Caloosa-hatchee River. It strives to edu-cate the public about the health of the river and its estuaries.

John Capece, Riverwatch sec-retary, reported that economic re-development of the 'Glades area and Herbert Hoover Dike repair should have a signifi cant bal-ance with water management's flow way plans. The Riverwatch organization realizes many envi-ronmental engineering plans are not yet evident.

" We are one of the few envi-ronmental organizations that has not endorsed the sugar buy out." said Mr. Capece.

He went on to encourage legislators to make plans and voice their ideas on economic concerns for the Okeechobee region, as well as flow way solu-tions.

John Capece mentioned that the agriculture system in south Florida should seriously consider using diverse products and low-er intensity farming methods. Ecological and financial innova-tions cannot be achieved over-night, but should begin in ear-nest. Also, Mr. Capece told the environmental and state agency attendees that it does not make sense to chase agriculture out of south Florida and into another part of the world.

Lee County's Smart Growth director, Wayne Daltry, reminded those at the meeting that many days there are concerns about too much dirty water, and on other days there are concerns that we cannot get enough water from Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosathchee River Basin. He commented that we must assist one another and keep the whole economic engine running, be-cause Florida competes with the rest of the world. Mr. Daltry asked those present to look to-ward economic opportunities for the entire river basin.

Ron Zimmerly, Hendry econonic development coun-cil, brought up the concept of an inland port, or distribution center, which could be built in Hendry County where the bulk of United States Sugar Corporation jobs may be lost. He added that there is a large work pool in this area and other businesses must be brought in as well, because of today's challenging economic downturn. "It is not the answer to all our needs," Mr. Zimmerly said of the inland port.

Carol Wehle, SFWMD execu-tive director, reported that water management representatives were in New York talking to lend-ers about the purchase of the sugar company. She mentioned that

even though these are exciting opportunities for restoration of the flow way and the revival of the Everglades, it is also a serious financial time. Ms. Wehle explained that about 5 million people expect service from SF-WMD and costs are increasing. However, the district truly wants to purchase acreage from the Everglades Agriculture Area.

Carol Wehle added that residents from Clewiston, Hendry County, have been working in the area for a long time and are dedicated to their community. She also commented that the C-43 reservoir project is waiting to take off and create much needed jobs. The project is intended to benefit the Caloosahatchee River Basin and Lake Okeechobee, but money is needed from the federal stimulus package. With some help from Congress the project can move forward.

Other representatives from SF-WMD made it known that water management wants to acquire 180,000 acres of land, and does not plan to purchase the infrastructure of the sugar company such as the mill and processing plant. The district recognized the importance of agriculture in south Florida.

State Senator Dave Aronberg was unable to take the boat tour, but he stopped at the dock in LaBelle and briefly spoke to the group about their important task.

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