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**LETTERS TO EDITOR: Farm Bureau
Opposes U.S. Sugar Buyout**

03/18/2009
Okeechobee News

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Letters to the Editor

Farm Bureau opposes U.S. Sugar buyout

The Board of Directors of the Okeechobee County Farm Bureau supports Florida Farm Bureau Federation's opposition to the proposed acquisition by the South Florida Water Management District of U.S. Sugar Corp. properties. While we remain firm in our support of private owners' rights to acquire, use and sell property, we oppose acquisition of more Florida lands by government.

As the state legislature grapples with record revenue shortfalls, the South Florida Water Management District is trying to borrow \$1.34 billion to put 300 square miles of land in South Florida. This deal will eventually cause thousands of acres of currently productive agricultural land to be removed from local tax rolls -- even as the State of Florida and local communities struggle to maintain funding to meet the basic needs of their citizens.

This remains a project without a plan and would likely draw funding and focus away from the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and other initiatives, negating years of effort.

The ultimate cost of this proposed buyout will far exceed the \$1.3 billion purchase price. Florida citizens and communities will suffer further at a time when they are already suffering enough.

Sincerely, Trey Whitehurst, President Okeechobee County Farm Bureau

Sustainable agricultural redevelopment debated

03/18/2009

Fort Myers Florida Weekly

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Sustainable agricultural redevelopment in the Okeechobee/ Everglades Region will be on the agenda of the March 19 meeting of the Southwest Florida Watershed Council.

As Florida considers the purchase of U.S. Sugar lands, the affected communities around Lake Okeechobee are aggressively pursuing economic redevelopment alternatives. Options include establishment of a biofuels industry and the continued cultivation of sugar cane and other crops using modified farming systems.

The presentation, by John C. Capece, Ph.D. of Southern DataStream, will include a discussion of sustainability considerations useful in planning economic redevelopment and ecological restoration.

The meeting is open to the public and begins at 2 p.m. at the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau meeting room at 12800 University Drive (southeast corner of Summerlin and College Parkway), Suite 325 in Fort Myers. There is no charge to attend. For more information, contact John Cassani at 694-5844.

The Southwest Florida Watershed Council, a 501(c)(3) organization, is dedicated to protecting, conserving, managing and/or restoring the land and water resources of the Caloosahatchee and Big Cypress watersheds to meet the economic, natural and cultural

needs for this and succeeding generations. For more information, visit www.swfwc.org.

Best site for new landfill won't threaten Everglades

03/18/2009

Palm Beach Post

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Palm Beach County's effort to find its next-generation landfill is proceeding like most major decisions on where to build big projects. It has been rocked by poor judgment, unnecessary controversy, bad politics and bad planning.

First there was the site picked in 1996 to get out of the politically untenable deal to build a landfill west of Boca Raton. But the 1996 site is next to the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, which raised an outcry over potential environmental problems. So last year the county sought bids from private landowners that could offer at least 1,600 acres at a location that would be more than 2 miles from the refuge and other environmentally critical features of the Everglades Agricultural Area.

But nobody put stormwater treatment areas on the off-limits list. One of those man-made marshes, managed by the South Florida Water Management District to cleanse pollutants from farm runoff before sending it to the Everglades, is one-tenth of a mile from Hundley Farms, one of two finalists. Last week, the Solid Waste Authority staff overrode its selection committee to endorse Hundley Farms.

The site has drawn appropriate criticism from Audubon of Florida, 1000 Friends of Florida - the state's leading growth-management advocacy group - and the Everglades Coalition, all of which have the resources to sue. Litigation could stall the project for years.

Staff disregarded the environmental concerns, which it doesn't deem credible, because several cities, including Wellington, Belle Glade and Pahokee, objected to the other site finalist. Those cities complained about aesthetics. Building a landfill on the State Road 80/U.S. 98 site, named because it is at the junction of those two Glades highways, would be a blot on the gateway to the Glades, the cities argued. Of course, Palm Beach County's existing landfill is on Florida's Turnpike at 45th Street - a gateway to all of South Florida. Also, none of those cities raised similar objections when Palm Beach County approved a 5,400-acre rock mine on U.S. 98 across from the proposed landfill site.

While environmental groups line up to oppose the Hundley site, the South Florida Water Management District has taken a curious position. Hundley is at the northwest corner of the district's Stormwater Treatment Area 1-West, which has become a functioning wetland that is home to wading birds. But expansion of the wetland, district Deputy Executive Director Chip Merriam said, still could take place to the west or south. Underground pollution, he said, doesn't appear to be an issue. But he also acknowledges

that he hasn't studied the site closely.

Little else separates the two finalists. Both are priced between \$36,000 and \$40,000 an acre, which the staff believes is negotiable. When taking into account land and hauling costs, the sites match up closely. The selection committee ranked them less than one point apart.

The Solid Waste Authority staff does make a good case against another potential option - to find a site on some of the U.S. Sugar land being sold to the water management district. Such a site could leave the authority in limbo for years, staff members wrote, because the U.S. Sugar sale could be delayed by lawsuits and the water district doesn't know yet what land it can spare. The authority wants the new landfill by 2015.

So it comes down to a site that would work against Everglades restoration and a site that would not. When building landfills, aesthetics don't trump environmental protection. And politics should not trump what is best for the county.

Land buy worthy

03/18/2009

Bradenton Herald

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Last summer when Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar Corp. unveiled the state purchase of 187,000 acres to help reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, hopes soared that maybe, just maybe, the long-delayed restoration project would move forward.

Wide swaths of land south of the lake would become a series of reservoirs and pollution-filtering wetlands that would help restore the River of Grass and the Everglades, starved of water from the dams and ditches built in the name of flood control.

Once replenished, the Everglades would recharge the aquifer that quenches the thirst of South Florida.

The Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers would be spared the pollution from Lake Okeechobee. The pollution in the two river estuaries has damaged the fishing and tourism industries on both coasts.

But is the cost too high — especially today during a deep recession?

Initially put at \$1.75 billion, the price tag now stands at \$1.34 billion, the midpoint between two appraisals and lower than another one a few years ago.

The South Florida Water Management District will foot the bill from the property tax it already collects in the district's 16 counties.

State Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, believes the tract is overpriced and the state does not need all the land. Bennett, who owns property in Clewiston, U.S. Sugar's home base, filed a bill in the Legislature that would require a purchase to go before voters.

His position is outlined in the guest column below.

We believe that his point on the price is short-sighted. The price will only increase as the economy rebounds.

Plus, once the state owns the entire parcel, valuable agricultural pieces outside the River of Grass could be sold off to such potential buyers as Florida Crystal, a U.S. Sugar competitor with considerable holdings in the region.

In addition, U.S. Sugar is only interested in selling the entire tract and would not reduce the acreage.

The company would lease the entire tract back for seven years, returning some \$100 million back to the water district. That time frame will allow the state to come up with an economic plan for the region to help offset the loss of agriculture jobs. Certainly, the water district anticipates providing hundreds of jobs on the dozens of public works projects for decades.

The region could also expect an increase in boating, fishing and tourism once the Everglades begin blossoming with water and life again.

Is Bennett's bill subterfuge to submarine this purchase? His populist position — no taxation without representation — is questionable. The governor engineered this deal in the best interests of the state, and he remains solidly behind it.

The water district points out that it would be difficult if not impossible to hold water district elections since it follows hydrologic boundaries, not county or voting ones.

This week a judge in West Palm Beach is hearing arguments about whether water district should be allowed to issue bonds for the purchase. That could be a deal killer.

Of greater impact, though, is the steep plunge in property values — expected to fall 14 percent in the water district.

But, as noted, Crist and the district hope to sell off some property, including U.S. Sugar's new state-of-the-art mill.

Outside of the state budget, this issue ranks as the next biggest in the Legislature — not only with Bennett's questionable bill but a companion one in the House. The debate should be over the merits of this purchase and the costs, not pushing this off on an all-but-impossible election.

Everglades restoration has been delayed for far too long. There will never be the perfect time. Costs will only escalate, the reason for all the past postponements.

It's time to move forward.

Water manager Financial changes may allow involvement by Wall Street hedge fund manager in U.S. Suga

03/17/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

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WEST PALM BEACH — Some people call it the "Paul Tudor Jones Clause."

Water managers inserted the clause - nicknamed after the billionaire hedge fund manager and chief financier of Everglades advocacy - into the South Florida Water Management District's financial policies for the first time last October.

The change would allow the agency to reach beyond traditional fixed-rate loans into the largely unregulated world of derivatives and hedge funds to secure financing for Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed \$1.34 billion land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

The new policy could enable Jones to provide the financial backing for the deal, the most expensive conservation land purchase in Florida history, district board member Mike Collins testified today.

Opponents say the testimony raised the specter of a titanic conflict of interest: Jones last year helped persuade Crist, whose campaign he had backed financially in 2006, to buy the sugar company's 180,000 acres in a historic bid to save the Everglades.

But Collins, a fierce critic of the proposed land purchase, acknowledged under cross-examination that there is no evidence that Jones intended to personally profit from the U.S. Sugar deal.

Collins is one of a slew of witnesses whom opponents of the U.S. Sugar deal called to the stand this week in their ongoing legal effort to block the water agency from issuing the \$2.2 billion in bonds to finance the purchase. The opponents include rival grower Florida Crystals Corp., the Miccosukee Indian tribe and Glades-area leaders.

Thom Rumberger, general counsel for the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation - of which Jones is one of the chief financial backers - called the questioning and testimony "specious slander."

"Have you ever known him to be a crook, thief, robber, cheat, liar or fraud?" Rumberger asked Collins, an Islamorada fishing guide and past friend of Jones.

"No," Collins replied.

In earlier testimony today, Collins was about to answer a question from tribal attorney Dexter Lehtinen asking what the policy change was nicknamed. But Circuit Judge Donald Hafele blocked him from answering after Rumberger objected, saying the nickname could prejudice the case.

Afterward, Lehtinen said Glades-area farmers first called it the "Paul

Tudor Jones Clause." Collins said the nickname had been "bouncing around all over the place" since critics of the deal began connecting dots - evidence or no - between the new policy and Jones' line of work.

The board approved the policy change and loosened several others last fall in preparation to finance the governor's mammoth land deal against what it collects in property taxes from its 16 counties. Other changes include raising its borrowing limit from 20 to 30 percent of its revenues and its debt limit from \$250 to \$350 per taxpayer.

The changes were intended to give the district as many options as possible to finance the deal, district chief financial officers Paul Dumars said afterward.

The hearings concerning the financing will continue into a final day in Palm Beach County Circuit Court on Wednesday but are expected to wind up eventually before the Florida Supreme Court.

Environmentalists have long considered the 180,000 acres of farmland Crist has proposed buying from U.S. Sugar essential to any meaningful restoration of the dying ecosystem.

But challengers, including river sugar grower Florida Crystals Corp., the Miccosukee Indian tribe and a group of Glades-area community leaders, argue that the land deal is a waste of taxpayer money that will serve only to bail out a debt-laden sugar company.

At issue is whether it's appropriate for the state to spend so much to buy the land before government scientists have devised a detailed blueprint for restoration. For at least seven years and perhaps longer, U.S. Sugar would be allowed to lease the property back at below-market rates and continue farming, a provision that opponents have described as a sweetheart deal.

DJ Hearing Into Fla Plan To Buy US Sugar's Land Underway-Report

03/17/2009

Dow Jones Commodities News Service

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Mar 17, 2009 (Dow Jones Commodities News Select via Comtex) --
DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

A three-day hearing is underway in a Florida court over the state's plan to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. to help protect the Everglades, reports the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. The South Florida Water Management District aims to buy the land with as much as \$2.2 billion in loans, which need to be approved by the judge. Several opponents - including Florida Crystals Corp. - are arguing against the plan on grounds that it overburdens taxpayers, doesn't include specific restoration plans and would delay Everglades work already underway. The hearing is scheduled to end Wednesday.

Full story at http://www.palmbeachpost.com/politics/content/local_news/epaper/2009/03/16/0316ussugar.html

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