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A YEAR LATER, 'GLADES DEAL BOGGED DOWN	06/20/2009	Sun Sentinel	

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A year ago, Gov. Charlie Crist surprised the state with a blockbuster land deal aimed at restoring the Everglades' "missing link" through sugar cane country.

More water would flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, thanks to Crist's \$1.75 billion bid to buy U.S. Sugar Corp.'s farmland and use it to re-engineer Florida's choked off River of Grass.

But since Crist's triumphant June 24, 2008, announcement, a national recession bogged down the grandiose plan with the eye-popping price tag.

The governor twice had to scale down what was to be the largest public land buy in state history. In May, he settled for a \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres, less than half the original target. It comes with an option to purchase another 107,000 acres from U.S. Sugar within 10 years, if the state's economic fortunes improve.

Like the earlier versions, South Florida property taxpayers would be left to pay for the proposed land buy.

Environmental groups still hail the deal, saying it is a historic opportunity to acquire property strategically located between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades and use it for restoration.

But opponents, led by U.S. Sugar's chief competitor Florida Crystals, continue to fight the deal in court. They argue it overburdens taxpayers and threatens to siphon away money needed for other long-stalled Everglades projects.

A deal that was once supposed to close in fall 2008 may stretch out for another year as the South Florida Water Management District tries to secure financing.

Now with Crist aiming to run for U.S. Senate, the deal's greatest champion could be out of the governor's mansion before the total transaction he envisioned gets to the finish line.

"Everything that has happened since [June 24, 2008] reinforces that they cannot afford it," said Dexter Lehtinen, attorney for the Miccosukee Tribe, which opposes the deal. "You would think the charade would be revealed. ... It's pretty disappointing to see people drinking the Kool-Aid."

Supporters counter that the opportunity to get the land remains too good to pass up and the phased purchase makes it financially feasible.

"Each of these pieces has a very critical role in dealing with Everglades restoration," said Florida

Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole, Crist's point man for the deal. "This is the right thing to do."

The new plan allows U.S. Sugar to lease back much of the 73,000 acres for up to 20 years, while the district plans the reservoirs and treatment area needed to deliver stormwater to the Everglades.

So instead of closing up shop, U.S. Sugar gets a large cash infusion and time to consider whether it can buy farmland elsewhere or ship in cane to keep its plant running.

U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert Coker said he expects both sides to see the deal through. Crist leaving office should not diminish the chances of completing the deal for the remaining 107,000 acres, Coker said.

"Anyone that has been involved in a transaction as complicated as this knows that they take time," Coker said. "I think the district still desires to purchase the entire property."

The economy will turn around within the 10-year window envisioned by the deal and the Everglades should remain "on the front burner" for the next governor, Crist's chief of staff Eric Eikenberg said.

"The Florida Everglades transcends partisan politics," he said.

The U.S. Sugar deal may not be finalized, but it is already costing taxpayers.

During the past year, the district invested about \$16 million to pay for a team of appraisers, environmental consultants, lawyers and financial advisers to work on the proposed deal. The district goes back to court in July to try to get its financing plan approved for the U.S. Sugar deal. The agency plans to borrow the money, with property taxes collected in the 16-county district from Orlando to the Keys paying off the debt.

Then comes testing the financial markets to see if the district can get an interest rate it can afford. Supporters say the cost of the land deal is worth the benefit of saving the Everglades.

"It has forever changed the assumption that we can't assemble land needed for water storage and treatment in the Everglades Agricultural Area," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation.

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\$536 million

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73,000 acres

The new plan would allow U.S. Sugar to lease back much of the 73,000 acres for up to 20 years, while the district plans the reservoirs and treatment areas needed to move water to the Everglades. Get more information

Learn all about the Everglades by visiting SunSentinel.com/riverofgrass

PHOTO: A proposed deal to buy 73,000 acres of farmland in the Everglades would let U.S. Sugar Corp. lease back land for up to 20 years, giving the company an option to maintain some production.

Jim Rassol, Sun Sentinel

The deal to buy U.S. Sugar farmland, proposed a year ago, was supposed to have closed in fall 2008.

Jim Rassol, Sun Sentinel

Map: locates Central Florida's current and available sugar land. Kwency Norman Sun Sentinel

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