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It's easy to believe that the potential riches of an inland port - whose location is to be determined by the - are destined for land owned by the Fanjul family-owned Florida Crystals. Easy, but not necessarily right.

Crystals is one of six bidders for an inland port, a massive warehouse and distribution hub for goods from three South Florida ports - the , Port Everglades and the Port of Miami. The cane fields next to the company's Okeelanta Mill in far-western Palm Beach County are particularly well-suited for an inland port, a state feasibility study says, because they are easily accessible from the south along U.S. 27.

Crystals, of course, is the other big sugar company. U.S. Sugar is the one that has been getting all the attention lately because it is selling nearly half of its land, 73,000 acres, to the government for \$536 million. In a show of power, Florida Crystals' lobbyists pressed legislators to challenge the deal, resulting in a dramatically smaller buyout but perhaps angering the buyout's champion, Gov. Crist. More on that later. There's an ingrained belief among political observers that Crystals retains enormous political power, long after Alfonso Fanjul could get President Clinton on the phone. The belief is justified. Crystals shredded environmentalists' concerns to persuade the Palm Beach County Commission to change the county's growth plan in a way that strengthens Crystals' inland port bid. Also, water managers' preliminary Everglades restoration plans go around, not through, Crystals' sugar mill. Without that determination, Crystals could not propose an inland port next door. Even with it, environmentalists point out, the inland port shouldn't be in position to block future restoration options. Despite Crystals' clout, the inland port competition is far from over. The has qualified six landowners to submit bids, expected by Oct. 1. Two, however, fell far short of the port's 3,500-acre requirement. Allowing them hurts Crystals, since one of the too-small bidders is in Palm Beach County. The bid from First Industrial Realty Trust, for nearly 1,000 acres at the site formerly known as the Florida Research Park, could divide local support.

The most threatening bid, however, comes from Hendry County. It consists of 6,000 acres offered by Hilliard Bros., a family-owned Clewiston company, and 2,500 acres from Hendry County. A third partner, offering expertise but not land, is U.S. Sugar.

The remaining bidders are powerful, too. Farming giants Lykes Bros. and A. Duda & Sons offered 3,500 acres in Glades County. Paving contractor Weekley Bros. proposed 1,300 acres in Hendry County. Industrial Developments International, a national developer, proposed 7,000 acres in western St. Lucie County.

The X factor is Gov. Crist, who is running for U.S. Senate. He can't be happy with Crystals' efforts to block the U.S. Sugar buyout. Also, the inland port offers the governor a legitimate way to quiet real concerns from Clewiston, the town U.S. Sugar built. One real concern is that U.S. Sugar's pullout will turn Clewiston into a ghost town. A shrunken buyout won Clewiston's grudging support. To cement that support, Hendry politicians, however, want something solid in place of U.S. Sugar. They want the inland port.

If the governor calculates that he can quiet dissent from Clewiston at the expense of Florida Crystals, which opposes the buyout anyway, won't he? In one rival, Crystals faces the very government entity - Hendry County - that Gov. Crist is wooing to preserve his environmental legacy.

While the decision rests with the , the state is an integral player, paying for studies and potential big-ticket items, such as railroads and highways.

The state, under Gov. Crist, is the X factor. Absent the X factor, Crystals is a sure thing. With it, Crystals may not stand a chance.

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