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ENVIRONMENT 3 Crist appointees could shape U.S. Sugar deal

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07/21/2009

Miami Herald

Morgan, Curtis

A Miami attorney is among three people Gov. Charlie Crist named Monday to the board of the South Florida Water Management District.

Gladys Perez, who has worked for Crist as a civil rights and environmental counsel, will join a Treasure Coast real estate agent and manager for the agricultural giant Lykes Brothers as members of a board overseeing a powerful, often controversial, agency that manages the water supply for 16 counties and directs Everglades restoration.

Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer for the Everglades Foundation, praised the appointments and predicted they would bolster sometimes shaky board support for Crist's \$536million land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp.

"It's my understanding these appointees all share the governor's vision," he said.

Significant financing obstacles and board votes remain before June 2010 closing date for the district to buy 72,800 acres of sugar fields and groves for Everglades restoration projects.

The governor also named Kevin Powers, 42, a real estate agent from Indiantown, and Joe Collins, 41, of Sebring, an engineering manager with Lykes Brothers. They can immediately take seats but face Senate confirmation.

Perez, 38, who opened her law office in Miami in December, said she was not given any political

litmus tests. "I imagine I was just somebody who had the background they wanted."

Perez previously worked as an assistant attorney general when Crist held that post, focusing on civil rights. In the governor's office, she was assistant general counsel over environmental issues, tackling Everglades cases and the complex water rights dispute between Florida and Georgia over the Apalachicola River.

Perez said she intended to approach often-contentious board issues with "fresh eyes."

The Miami native will fill the seat of Miami attorney Paul Huck Jr. Huck resigned in April, citing a conflict because his firm was involved in a lawsuit against U.S. Sugar.

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Crist names three to fill vacant board seats at South Florida Water Management

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07/20/2009

News Press - Online

TONY DORIS ? Palm Beach Post ?

With his massive sugar land purchase in the balance, Gov. Charlie Crist today named three relative unknowns to fill seats on the water board overseeing the Everglades restoration and South Florida's faucets.

The nominees, to the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District, are:

? Joe Collins, 41, a Sebring engineering manager with agricultural giant Lykes Bros. He takes the seat vacated in June 2008 by Malcolm "Bubba" Wade, a senior vice president at U.S. Sugar Corp.

? Gladys Perez, 38, a Miami lawyer who worked as an assistant general counsel under Crist and former Gov. Jeb Bush. She succeeds Paul Huck Jr., a former top adviser to Crist, who resigned in March.

? Indiantown real estate firm partner Kevin Powers. He succeeds Melissa Meeker, a Stuart environmental consultant, whose term expired in March.

The appointees take office immediately but will require Senate confirmation when the legislature returns to session next spring. Perez's term would last until March 2012, while the other two would serve until March 2013.

Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon of Florida, said his group recommended Collins for Wade's old seat.

"We have always found him to be a very straight shooter," said Draper, who is running for state agriculture commissioner. "There needs to be a representative of the agricultural community on the district governing board, and we think he forms a good bridge between the environmental and agricultural communities."

A spokeswoman for the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida also lauded the choice, saying he would bring an understanding of the district's need to balance water supply, agricultural and lake management issues.

The spokeswoman, Barbara Miedema, also lamented the governor's 13-month-long delay in replacing Wade.

Wade stepped down immediately after Crist announced the state's huge land deal with U.S. Sugar, which in its current version would cost the district \$536 million for 73,000 acres aimed at helping restore the Everglades. The deal has drawn criticism from some lawmakers, who say it would destroy farming-related jobs in the rural counties around Lake Okeechobee.

Some suggested the delay was "curious," as Draper put it, or political, as the attorney for the Miccosukee Indian tribe asserted.

"Some of these vacancies were there during the (legislative) session, and he just didn't want to have to face confirmation hearings," said tribal attorney Dexter Lehtinen. "He waited until after the session, and they'll be able to vote his way until they face Senate confirmation."

With Wade's seat vacant, and Huck unable to vote on the land deal because of a conflict of interest, the U.S. Sugar transaction squeaked to approval in a 4-3 vote of the district's board last year. The deal faces further votes by the board.

Collins, an engineer, has experience in design, permitting and operation of large drainage systems for agriculture, mainly for production of cattle, citrus, sugar cane and timber. He served on the district's Water Resources Advisory Commission and the Lake Okeechobee Advisory Committee.

Powers, a partner at Indiantown Realty, also has been a citrus grove owner and produce company sales manager. He has been active in community organizations, including the Stuart/Martin County Chamber of Commerce, Martin County Taxpayer Association, Economic Council of Martin County and United Way of Martin County.

Neither Collins nor Powers could be reached for comment this evening.

Perez, based in Miami since January 2008, was assistant general counsel in the Executive Office of the Governor under Crist and Bush, where she handled Everglades and other environmental matters. She also was counsel to the Florida Land and Water Adjudicatory Commission.

"From the perspective of environment, water issues and the Everglades, I'm somebody who has familiarity with the issues coming in," she said.

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Crist names three new South Florida water board appointees

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07/20/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid South Florida Sun-Sentinel

SOUTH FLORIDA - Gov. Charlie Crist on Monday filled long-standing vacancies on the appointed board of the agency that oversees South Florida's water supply.

The South Florida Water Management District also leads the governor's proposed Everglades restoration land deal. Critics contend that deal factored into Crist leaving at least one board vacancy open for more than a year.

The three new appointees to the district board, still subject to state Senate approval, include:

Joe Collins, 41, of Sebring, who works for Lykes Brothers, which has sugar, cattle and landscaping operations;

Gladys Perez, 38, an attorney from Miami; and

Kevin Powers, 42, of Indiantown and a partner with Indiantown Realty.

Collins would succeed Malcolm Wade Jr., a vice president at U.S. Sugar Corp. who resigned in June 2008 after Crist announced a plan to buy U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration.

Glades residents and agricultural representatives, who opposed the deal, criticized the governor for leaving Wade's seat vacant during months of negotiations over the land deal. The deal at one point stayed alive by just a one-vote margin.

The district board has since agreed to move forward with a scaled-down version of the deal that calls for spending \$536 million to acquire 73,000 acres. The land would be used to help restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

The district still must secure financing for the deal and the district board could back out if those costs rise too high.

The nine-member, volunteer district board oversees an agency charged with balancing the water needs of the public, agriculture and the environment.

