

## TCPalm: Florida's Treasure Coast and Palm Beaches - Printer-friendly story

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### **Editorial: For the Everglades**

By TCPalm Staff

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"We can either let the opportunity slip through our fingers or continue to pursue the opportunity."

So said Mike Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, during a conference call a few days after the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District voted 4-3 to approve the \$1.34 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration.

By approving the deal, the governing board seized the opportunity and pushed the process forward. Board members also had the foresight to add an amendment giving the board an escape clause if it's determined, at a later date, the purchase cuts into the district's core operations.

The deal, in its present form, is far from perfect — a reality that may have prompted Sole to add: "This is just the beginning. We have a lot of work ahead."

A lot of work indeed.

And the place to start is where this process should begun in the first place: by bringing all interested parties to the table and negotiating a comprehensive deal that provides the best, long-term solutions for all (taxpayers, sugar growers, communities throughout the Everglades Agricultural Area, and the water management district).

The state doesn't need all 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land to recreate the natural flow-way and restore the River of Grass. But it does need land from Florida Crystals, the other major sugar grower in the EAA, to complete the project.

Yet, inexplicably, Florida Crystals has been virtually excluded from the negotiations.

"We have been telling the governor's office and the water management district we'd be more than happy to sit and talk," Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens recently told the editorial board of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. "We did have a written agreement we gave them several months ago, but haven't heard back from them. ... The flow-way cannot be built unless they acquire Florida Crystals land. We've told them we want to be partners. ... We have been wanting to make a deal for six months."

Why the cold shoulder, gov?

The state's negotiations, to this point, have been far too secretive and selective.

Florida Crystals wants to be a part of the solution. Florida Crystals would have an

incredible incentive to give environmentalists what they need to complete the flow-way if the water district parlayed the agreement with U.S. Sugar into a comprehensive plan with both sugar companies.

Otherwise, the state might need to find millions — or billions — of dollars more to buy Florida Crystals' land.

Meantime, the Lawrence Group, a large agriculture and land company, has made an offer to buy U.S. Sugar. Open conversations and negotiations between the government, environmentalists, U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals and Lawrence could benefit all entities. Lawrence and Florida Crystals appear to be willing to use private capital to leverage government dollars.

In the end, it's critical that the health of the Everglades and the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers be preserved through what likely will be the most expensive environmental rescue in history. Part of this effort will involve cleaning out Lake Okeechobee. State officials must ensure they have the funding to get the entire job done, and the only way they'll be able to do that is if they manage the land purchases prudently.



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