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Sugar deal sound package

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08/06/2009
Tampa Tribune - Online
ANDREW D.W. HILL

Today, a decision in a West Palm Beach courthouse could determine how the state of Florida moves forward with obtaining land that many believe is vital to sustain the environment and the economy.

The acquisition of U.S. Sugar Corp. property by the state has been viewed favorably by most conservation-minded organizations, yet there has been limited analysis of the financial benefits of the transaction. There is no better opportunity to apply "eco-economics" theories and engage in an objective cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate how this acquisition makes perfect sense.

The estimated cost to acquire the initial 73,000 acres is $536 million. While it is a significant investment, it pales in magnitude to the economic value of eco-tourism and sport fishing in the Everglades region.

According to a recently published report on the economic value of the Everglades by Florida Atlantic University, the total annual impact of ecotourism in 2007 was $1.8 billion. In addition, the total annual expenditures of sport fishing in Florida are estimated to be between $3.4 billion and $5.6 billion.

With approximately 70 percent of the state's population residing near the Everglades region, sport fishing in the Everglades appears to be at least a $2 billion annual business.

Just looking at the estimated annual expenditures associated with ecotourism and sport fishing - a combined $4 billion - the initial acquisition cost of U.S. Sugar Corp. properties of $536 million appears to be an economically justified investment. With the initial acquisition representing only 13 percent of the annual economic benefit of just two industries, the investment to improve the long-term health of this sustainable resource appears to be of sound judgment.

The long-term environmental benefits of re-establishing water flows from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay also include minimizing unnatural water discharges, and the acquisition also mitigates other potential expenses.

The red tide problems experienced a few years ago caused dramatic environmental and economic damage to the tourist business on the East and West coasts of Florida. Further, tourists who experienced nauseating fish kills and respiratory problems are unlikely to return to Florida. In addition, re-establishing a portion of the natural southern water flow will avoid some of the cost of expensive and unproven engineering techniques.

The U.S. Sugar acquisition will help ensure that we have a sustainable natural resource that is integral to the economy of the Everglades region. While the cost to finance the acquisition is significant - relative to the economic benefits derived from the Everglades region - the investment is a sound business decision that will pay dividends in improving the quality of life and economic opportunity for Florida residents for generations to come.

Andrew Hill serves as vice chair of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida and is past chair of the Red Snook Fishing Tournament with Roland Martin, an International Game Fish Association-sanctioned event.

Everglades land deal lawsuit set for closings

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08/06/2009
WAWS-TV - Online

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) - Closing arguments begin in a lawsuit that could undo Florida's historic planned $536 million deal to buy land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration.

South Florida water managers plan to buy 73,000 acres of farmland from the company to construct reservoirs and water treatment marshes. The deal also leaves open the option for the state to purchase more land from the nation's largest cane sugar producer.

But U.S. Sugar's main rival, Florida Crystals, and the Miccosukee Indians have sued over the deal. Closing arguments are set for Thursday. They claim it is an irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars and could further delay Everglades restoration efforts.

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Florida Bay may face collapse as parties bicker over restoration projects

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08/06/2009
St. Petersburg Times - Online
In Print: Thursday, August 6, 2009

A great egret wades the shallows of Florida Bay, an estuary fed by saltwater from the gulf and freshwater from the Everglades. But South Florida sprawl is impacting that freshwater flow.

[Associated Press]

Social Bookmarking

ISLAMORADA — Boat captain Tad Burke looks out over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

In his 25 years on these waters, he has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species such as bonefish that draw recreational anglers from around the world.

Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations — Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys — but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

Florida Bay is a sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, covering nearly three times the area of New York City.

The headwaters of the Everglades — starting some 300 miles north near Orlando — used to end up here after flowing south in a shallow sheet like a broad, slow-moving river, filtering through miles of muck, marsh and sawgrass.

Historically, the bay thrived on that mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico.

But to the north of the bay, South Florida development has left the land scored by roads, dikes and miles of flood-control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater.

The ill effects extend even across the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish such as grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating to the ocean and to the reefs.

"If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here," said Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association. "When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction."

Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation.

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl.

But attempts to fix the Everglades have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone.

"It's really aggravating," Burke says. "We've seen very little, if any, really groundbreaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay."

A litany of lawsuits are partly to blame, says Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

Name an environmental group, and the agency has been sued by them.

While pro-environment groups say their lawsuits are not designed to stop restoration — but to improve projects — litigation inevitably creates delays. And some plaintiffs, such as Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer that farms in the Everglades, is trying to protect its business.

Wehle calls them all "obstructionists," including the Miccosukee Tribe, which has her agency back in court today for closing arguments in a lawsuit.

The Miccosukee, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. In the current case, the tribe and Florida Crystals are trying to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from another sugar giant, U.S. Sugar Corp.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for restoration projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with the new land. Florida Crystals also argues the purchase would give its main competitor an unfair business advantage.

Back on Florida Bay, Burke just wants something done before it's too late. "In a lot of ways," he says, "it's still pristine and beautiful down here, but it's also on its last dying breath."

State's $536 million Everglades restoration plan up for debate in Palm Beach County cour

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08/06/2009
Palm Beach Post - Online
PAUL QUINLAN

WEST PALM BEACH — Closing arguments are set for this afternoon in a high-stakes legal challenge to Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed $536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. aimed at restoring the Everglades.

Attorneys for the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency Crist tapped to finance the deal, are expected to go first at today's 2:30 p.m. hearing at the Palm Beach County Courthouse, according to district spokesman Randy Smith.

Agency attorneys will argue why the district should be allowed to finance what would be the state's most expensive conservation land purchase.

Crist and environmentalists say the 73,000-acre deal, which includes an option to purchase more land later, will allow them to re-establish the historic, flowing connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

The debt would be repaid with property taxes collected in 16 central and south Florida counties over the next 30 years.

But attorneys for U.S. Sugar's chief competitor, Florida Crystals, and the Miccosukee Indian tribe, whose members live in the Everglades, have asked Circuit Judge Donald W. Hafele to block the financing, saying the state has only sketchy plans for how the land will be used and has failed to demonstrate that a deal would serve a public purpose.

Regardless of the ruling, which could come today, the case is expected to be appealed to the Florida Supreme Court.

Everglades land deal lawsuit set for closings

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08/06/2009
Ocala.com

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News Press - Online
PAUL QUINLAN ? Palm Beach Post ?

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Everglades land deal lawsuit set for closings

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08/06/2009
MalaysiaNews.net

New Everglades land deal could ease restoration

If water managers approve the smaller, cheaper version of Gov. Charlie Crist's Big Sugar land deal Wednesday, they won't be done dealing.

New tweaks in the $536 million offer to buy 73,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. would give water managers more time and flexibility to cut follow-up land deals -- most likely with rival grower Florida Crystals -- to improve Everglades restoration projects.

''This puts us in a much better bargaining position in any future negotiations,'' said Carol Ann Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District.

Florida Bay's ecosystem on the brink of collapse

Boat captain Tad Burke looks out over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

He's been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

"Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population,'' says Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

U.S. Sugar OK's land sale for Everglades restoration

The board of U.S. Sugar Corp. voted Friday in favor of Gov. Charlie Crist's latest proposal to buy much of its farmland for use in Everglades restoration.

The deal -- to buy 73,000 acres of citrus and sugar cane land for $536 million -- must now go to a vote before the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District, which meets next week to review the latest proposal. The district would borrow the money, repaying the debt over 30 years with property taxes collected in all or part of 16 counties in Central and South Florida.

The land, meanwhile, would be used to construct reservoirs and filter marshes to restore the historically flowing freshwater connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Everglades land may be offered as collateral in U.S. Sugar deal

South Florida water managers may offer Wall Street more than a quarter-million acres of state-owned lands, including thousands of acres of Everglades restoration tracts, as collateral to finance Gov. Charlie Crist's land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. and future environmental projects, records show.

The South Florida Water Management District has identified 283,000 acres worth $1.5 billion -- including preserve lands, filter marshes and Everglades-area wetlands -- that could be used to guarantee some of the $2.2 billion they intend to borrow to buy the U.S. Sugar land and recreate the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

The collateral might include 2.8 acres under the Herbert Hoover Dike.

The Associated Press

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08/06/2009
Miami Herald - Online

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08/06/2009
Gainesville Sun - Online, The

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08/06/2009
KESQ-TV - Online

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Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations - Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys - but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

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The headwaters of the Everglades - starting some 300 miles north near Orlando - used to end up here after flowing south in a shallow sheet like a broad, slow-moving river, filtering through miles of muck, marsh and sawgrass.

Historically, the bay thrived on that perfect mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. It was a virtual Garden of Eden, home to a bounty of wading birds, fish, sea grasses and sponges.

But to the north of the bay, man's unforgiving push to develop South Florida has left the land dissected with roads, dikes and miles of flood control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater flow and slowly killing the bay.

The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs. 'If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here,' Burke says. 'When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction. 'You could argue that the bay has already collapsed,' he adds. Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning. 'The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either,' says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. 'Their fates are one and the same.' For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever. 'Having that water coming down from the Everglades is key,' says Rob Clift of the National Parks Conservation Association. 'It has to be restored.' Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone. 'It's really aggravating,' Burke says. 'We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay.' A litany of lawsuits filed by parties favoring one solution over another are partly to blame, says Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

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While pro-environment groups say their lawsuits are not designed to stop restoration - but to improve projects - litigation inevitably creates delays. And some plaintiffs, like Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer which farms in the Everglades, is trying to protect its business.

Wehle calls them all 'obstructionists,' including the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians who have her agency back in court Aug. 6 for closing arguments in yet another lawsuit. 'There are a handful of people that choose not to participate in this process and instead use litigation, and who is losing? The environment is losing,' Wehle says. The Miccosukee, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. In the current case, the tribe and Florida Crystals are trying to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from another sugar giant, U.S. Sugar Corp.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for restoration projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with the new land. Florida Crystals also argues the purchase would give its main competitor an unfair business advantage. 'Meeting upon meeting, and the Everglades continues to die,' Lorion says. Back on Florida Bay, Burke just wants something done before it's too late. To the casual visitor, the area is stunning even today. But Burke knows better. 'In a lot of ways,'

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Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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08/06/2009
BusinessWeek - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF
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The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. It's the tribe and a few others who now have the district back in court as part of an effort to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar Corp.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for actual projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with all the new land.

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Associated Press (AP)
SKOLOFF, BRIAN

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He has been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

"Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population," says Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations _ Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys _ but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

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Historically, the bay thrived on that perfect mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. It was a virtual Garden of Eden, home to a bounty of wading birds, fish, sea grasses and sponges.

But to the north of the bay, man's unforgiving push to develop South Florida has left the land dissected with roads, dikes and miles (kilometers) of flood control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater flow and slowly killing the bay.

The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs.

"If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here," Burke says. "When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction.

"You could argue that the bay has already collapsed," he says.

Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. "Their fates are one and the same."

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever.

"Having that water coming down from the Everglades is key," says Rob Clift of the National Parks Conservation Association. "It has to be restored."

Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone.

"It's really aggravating," Burke says. "We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay."

A litany of lawsuits filed by parties favoring one solution over another are partly to blame, says Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

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Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for actual projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with all the new land.

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The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

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Peligra el sistema ecológico de la Bahía de la Florida

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08/05/2009
Associated Press (AP)
SKOLOFF, BRIAN

ISLA MORADA, Florida, EE.UU._El capitán Tad Burke observa la Bahía de la Florida y ve un ecosistema que se muere, mientras políticos, terratenientes y defensores del medio ambiente se pelean entre sí.

Lleva 25 años recorriendo estas aguas y ha visto mermar la cantidad de camarones y langostas que se reproducen en esta zona. También noata que tienden a desaparecer especies como el bonefish, popular pez de la familia del tarpón que atrae a pescadores deportivos de todo el mundo.

"El bonefish era muy común y ahora hay una décima parte de lo que había antes en la bahía, e incluso en los cayos, porque el habitat ya no resiste una población tan grande", manifestó Burke, quien es director de la Asociación de Guías de Pesca de los Cayos de la Florida (Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association).

Los expertos temen que se produzca un desastre en el ecosistema de la zona, que haga peligrar no sólo algunos de los destinos turísticos más populares del país --como el Parque Nacional de los Everglades y los Cayos de la Florida--, sino también la pesca comercial y deportiva, que genera millones de dólares.

La Bahía de la Florida es un enorme estuario en el extremo sur de la península.

Las aguas de los Everglades, procedentes de una región próxima a Orlando, 480 kilómetros (300 millas) al norte, desembocaban aquí tras un recorrido lento a través de inmensos pantanos.

Históricamente, la bahía ofrecía una mezcla ideal del agua fresca de los Everglades y el agua salada del vecino Golfo de México. Era un sitio perfecto para aves, peces, seagrass (plantas marinas) y esponjas.

Pero al norte de la bahía, el desarrollo del sur de la Florida ha llenado la región de edificios, carreteras, diques y canales para controlar las inundaciones, que interrumpen el flujo del agua del norte y lentamente mata la bahía.

Los efectos de este fenómeno se hacen sentir más allá de la estrecha franja de cayos de la Florida e incluso en los arrecifes de corales del océano Atlántico, al este.

"Si desaparecen los peces, sería el fin de todo esto", manifestó Burke. "Si eso sucede, desaparecerán también los arrecifes, habrá una reacción en cadena".

"Se podría decir que la bahía ya está en vías de extinción", agregó.

Las algas impiden que el sol, tan vital en el ciclo de la vida, penetre la superficie del agua. Las plantas marinas que ofrecen un habitat para la cadena alimenticia están desapareciendo. Y algunas aves migratorias ya no regresan.

"La salud de la bahía está atada al estado de los Everglades, y los Everglades no mejoran", dijo Tom Van Lent, científico de la Fundación Everglades, un organismo sin fines de lucro que vela por ese parque. "Sus destinos están unidos".

Durante décadas el estado ha buscado formas de restaurar el flujo natural del agua a través de los Everglades y contener la contaminación generada por las plantaciones de azúcar, la ganadería y el desarrollo urbano. Se trata del proyecto de restauración de pantanos más grande jamás emprendido.

"Es fundamental que hagamos que siga llegando el agua a los Everglades", expresó Rob Clift, de la Asociación Nacional de Conservación de Parques.

Los esfuerzos por resolver el problema, incluida la construcción de lagunas de depuración, se ven entorpecidos por intrigas políticas, escasez de fondos y disputas en torno a cómo encarar el asunto. De este modo, se vende tierra y se completan proyectos, pero no se hace nada para restaurar los pantanos.

"Es realmente irritante", dijo Burke. "No avanzan los proyectos que pueden ayudar a restablecer el flujo del agua hacia la bahía".

Una de las razones es la cantidad de demandas que presentan grupos que favorecen una solución sobre otra, según Carol Wehle, directora ejecutiva del organismo estatal de recursos acuíferos (el South Florida Water Management District), que supervisa la restauración de los Everglades.

Esa dependencia ha sido demandada por prácticamente todas las agrupaciones defensores del medio ambiente, que Wehle define como "obstruccionistas".

"Hay un puñado de gente que ha decidido no participar en este proceso y recurre a los tribunales. ¿Quién sale perdiendo? El medio ambiente", señaló Wehle.

Los indios miccosukee, que consideran los Everglades sus tierras ancestrales, han demandado en numerosas ocasiones al Water District. En estos momentos libran una batalla judicial para bloquear una compra de tierras por valor de 536 millones de dólares, que el estado piensa adquirir a la U.S. Sugar Corporation.

Una portavoz de la tribu, Joette Lorion, dice que ese negocio puede costarle miles de millones de dólares a los contribuyentes, agotar los fondos para los proyectos de restauración y generar más demoras mientras el estado decide qué hacer exactamente con esas tierras.

"Hay una reunión tras otra, y mientras tanto los Everglades siguen agonizando", expresó Lorion.

El water district dice que el negocio es una oportunidad histórica de acabar con la producción de azúcar y disponer de embalses y áreas de purificación para tratar y almacenar el agua.

Burke pide que se haga algo antes de que sea demasiado tarde. Para el visitante desprevenido, la zona luce todavía espectacular. Pero Burke sabe que las cosas están cambiando.

"En muchos sentidos, sigue siendo hermoso e inmaculado", declaró. "Pero esto está agonizando".

Boat Captain Tad Burke Looks out Over Florida Bay and Sees an Ecosystem That's Dry

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08/05/2009
Associated Press (AP) - West Palm Beach Bureau
Skoloff, Brian

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08/05/2009
Canadaeast.com
Brian Skoloff

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Florida Bay's Ecology On The Brink Of Collapse

08/05/2009
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ISLAMORADA, Fla., Aug. 5, 2009

Experts Fear Florida Bay's Ecology On Brink Of Collapse, Threatening Tourism, Fishery

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Experts fear Florida Bay's ecology on brink of collapse, threatening tourism, fishery

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08/05/2009
Chronicle-Journal

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Florida Bay's Ecosystem on Brink of Collapse; Threatens Tourism

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08/05/2009
Fox News Channel

A Great Egret is shown in the shallow waters of Florida Bay in Islamorada, Fla.

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The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs.

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Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. "Their fates are one and the same."

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever.

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Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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08/05/2009
KOAA-TV - Online
Updated Wed Aug 05, 2009, 08:46 AM MDT

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Struggle to curb pollution

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Peligra el sistema ecol

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08/05/2009
La Voz - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF

ISLA MORADA, Florida, EE.UU. - El capitán Tad Burke observa la Bahía de la Florida y ve un ecosistema que se muere, mientras políticos, terratenientes y defensores del medio ambiente se pelean entre sí.

Lleva 25 años recorriendo estas aguas y ha visto mermar la cantidad de camarones y langostas que se reproducen en esta zona. También noata que tienden a desaparecer especies como el bonefish, popular pez de la familia del tarpón que atrae a pescadores deportivos de todo el mundo.

'El bonefish era muy común y ahora hay una décima parte de lo que había antes en la bahía, e incluso en los cayos, porque el habitat ya no resiste una población tan grande', manifestó Burke, quien es director de la Asociación de Guías de Pesca de los Cayos de la Florida (Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association).

Los expertos temen que se produzca un desastre en el ecosistema de la zona, que haga peligrar no sólo algunos de los destinos turísticos más populares del país --como el Parque Nacional de los Everglades y los Cayos de la Florida--, sino también la pesca comercial y deportiva, que genera millones de dólares.

La Bahía de la Florida es un enorme estuario en el extremo sur de la península.

Las aguas de los Everglades, procedentes de una región próxima a Orlando, 480 kilómetros (300 millas) al norte, desembocaban aquí tras un recorrido lento a través de inmensos pantanos.

Históricamente, la bahía ofrecía una mezcla ideal del agua fresca de los Everglades y el agua salada del vecino Golfo de México. Era un sitio perfecto para aves, peces, seagrass (plantas marinas) y esponjas.

Pero al norte de la bahía, el desarrollo del sur de la Florida ha llenado la región de edificios, carreteras, diques y canales para controlar las inundaciones, que interrumpen el flujo del agua del norte y lentamente mata la bahía.

Los efectos de este fenómeno se hacen sentir más allá de la estrecha franja de cayos de la Florida e incluso en los arrecifes de corales del océano Atlántico, al este.

'Si desaparecen los peces, sería el fin de todo esto', manifestó Burke. 'Si eso sucede, desaparecerán también los arrecifes, habrá una reacción en cadena'.

'Se podría decir que la bahía ya está en vías de extinción', agregó.

Las algas impiden que el sol, tan vital en el ciclo de la vida, penetre la superficie del agua. Las plantas marinas que ofrecen un habitat para la cadena alimenticia están desapareciendo. Y algunas aves migratorias ya no regresan.

'La salud de la bahía está atada al estado de los Everglades, y los Everglades no mejoran', dijo Tom Van Lent, científico de la Fundación Everglades, un organismo sin fines de lucro que vela por ese parque. 'Sus destinos están unidos'.

Durante décadas el estado ha buscado formas de restaurar el flujo natural del agua a través de los Everglades y contener la contaminación generada por las plantaciones de azúcar, la ganadería y el desarrollo urbano. Se trata del proyecto de restauración de pantanos más grande jamás emprendido.

'Es fundamental que hagamos que siga llegando el agua a los Everglades', expresó Rob Clift, de la Asociación Nacional de Conservación de Parques.

Los esfuerzos por resolver el problema, incluida la construcción de lagunas de depuración, se ven entorpecidos por intrigas políticas, escasez de fondos y disputas en torno a cómo encarar el asunto. De este modo, se vende tierra y se completan proyectos, pero no se hace nada para restaurar los pantanos.

'Es realmente irritante', dijo Burke. 'No avanzan los proyectos que pueden ayudar a restablecer el flujo del agua hacia la bahía'.

Una de las razones es la cantidad de demandas que presentan grupos que favorecen una solución sobre otra, según Carol Wehle, directora ejecutiva del organismo estatal de recursos acuíferos (el South Florida Water Management District), que supervisa la restauración de los Everglades.

Esa dependencia ha sido demandada por prácticamente todas las agrupaciones defensores del medio ambiente, que Wehle define como 'obstruccionistas'.

'Hay un puñado de gente que ha decidido no participar en este proceso y recurre a los tribunales. ¿Quién sale perdiendo? El medio ambiente', señaló Wehle.

Los indios miccosukee, que consideran los Everglades sus tierras ancestrales, han demandado en numerosas ocasiones al Water District. En estos momentos libran una batalla judicial para bloquear una compra de tierras por valor de 536 millones de dólares, que el estado piensa adquirir a la U.S. Sugar Corporation.

Una portavoz de la tribu, Joette Lorion, dice que ese negocio puede costarle miles de millones de dólares a los contribuyentes, agotar los fondos para los proyectos de restauración y generar más demoras mientras el estado decide qué hacer exactamente con esas tierras.

'Hay una reunión tras otra, y mientras tanto los Everglades siguen agonizando', expresó Lorion.

El water district dice que el negocio es una oportunidad histórica de acabar con la producción de azúcar y disponer de embalses y áreas de purificación para tratar y almacenar el agua.

Burke pide que se haga algo antes de que sea demasiado tarde. Para el visitante desprevenido, la zona luce todavía espectacular. Pero Burke sabe que las cosas están cambiando.

'En muchos sentidos, sigue siendo hermoso e inmaculado', declaró. 'Pero esto está agonizando'.

Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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08/05/2009
Lake Wylie Pilot - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF
Associated Press Writer

A A flock of cormorants stand on polls in Florida Bay in Islamorada, Fla., Wednesday, July 15, 2009. A sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, Florida Bay sits like a saucer beneath a potted plant. Much of Florida's rainwater used to end up here after filtering through the miles of muck and sawgrass of the Everglades.

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Name an environmental group, and the agency has been sued by them.

While pro-environment groups say their lawsuits are not designed to stop restoration - but to improve projects - litigation inevitably creates delays. And some plaintiffs, like Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer which farms in the Everglades, is trying to protect its business.

Wehle calls them all "obstructionists," including the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians who have her agency back in court Aug. 6 for closing arguments in yet another lawsuit.

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The Miccosukee, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. In the current case, the tribe and Florida Crystals are trying to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from another sugar giant, U.S. Sugar Corp.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for restoration projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with the new land. Florida Crystals also argues the purchase would give its main competitor an unfair business advantage.

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Experts fear Florida Bay's ecology on brink of collapse, threatening tourism, fishery

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08/05/2009
Lethbridge Herald - Online, The

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08/05/2009
Los Angeles Times - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF

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BRIAN SKOLOFF, Associated Press Writer

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08/05/2009
News - Online, The
READER POLL

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Brian Skoloff, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning.

"The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either," says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. "Their fates are one and the same."

For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the

pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever.

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Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone.

"It's really aggravating," Burke says. "We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay."

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The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. It's the tribe and a few others who now have the district back in court as part of an effort to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar Corp.

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Andrew Hill Everglades land buy good deal for Florida economy

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08/05/2009
News Press - Online

Andrew Hill - Guest Opinion August 5, 2009

The acquisition of U.S. Sugar Corp. property by the state of Florida has been viewed favorably by most conservation-minded organizations, yet there has been limited analysis of the financial benefits of the transaction. There is no better opportunity to apply "eco-economics" theories and engage in an objective cost-benefit analysis to demonstrate how this acquisition makes perfect sense.

The estimated cost to acquire the initial 73,000 acres is $536 million. While it is a significant investment, it pales in magnitude compared to the economic value of eco-tourism and sport fishing in the Everglades. According to a recently published report on the economic value of the Everglades by Florida Atlantic University, the total annual impact of eco-tourism in 2007 was $1.8 billion. In addition, the total annual expenditures of sport fishing in Florida are estimated to be between $3.4 billion and $5.6 billion.

With approximately 70 percent of the state's population residing near the Everglades region, sport fishing in the Everglades appears to be at least a $2 billion annual business. Just looking at the estimated annual expenditures associated with eco-tourism and sport fishing, (a combined $4 billion), the initial acquisition cost of U.S. Sugar Corp. properties of $536 million appears to be an economically justified investment. With the initial acquisition representing only 13 percent of the annual economic benefit of just two industries, the investment to improve the long-term health of this sustainable resource appears to be of sound judgment.

The long-term environmental benefits of re-establishing water flows from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay also includes minimizing unnatural water discharges, and the acquisition also mitigates other potential expenses. The red tide problems experienced a few years ago caused dramatic environmental and economic damage to the tourist business on the east and west coasts of Florida. Further, tourists who experienced nauseating fish kills and respiratory problems are unlikely to return to Florida. In addition, re-establishing a portion of the natural southern water flow will avoid some of the cost of expensive and unproven engineering techniques.

In summary, the U.S. Sugar Corp. acquisition will help ensure that we have a sustainable natural resource that is integral to the economy of the Everglades region. While the cost to finance the acquisition is significant - relative to the economic benefits derived from the Everglades region - the investment is a sound business decision that will pay dividends in the form of improving the quality of life and economic opportunity for Florida residents for generations to come.

- Andrew D.W. Hill, C.F.A., is a senior portfolio manager with Comerica Asset Management. He is vice chair of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida and past chair of the RedSnook Fishing Tournament with Roland Martin, an International Game Fish Association-sanctioned event.

Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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08/05/2009
News-Review - Online, The
BRIAN SKOLOFF

Boat captain Tad Burke looks out over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

He's been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

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Don't block historic chance to restore Everglades

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08/05/2009
Palm Beach Post - Online

Former Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne called the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration a "historic turning point for the largest watershed restoration project in the world." Environmental groups and newspapers from Miami to Pensacola, as well as others across the nation, agree that this is "fresh hope"- in the opinion of The New York Times - for protecting and restoring America's Everglades.

This makes the legal challenge by a small minority of interests that oppose the land acquisition a frustrating step along the path to progress. Their challenge does not oppose environmental improvements. It does not question the need for more water storage and treatment. Instead, the challengers are using the procedural step of court validation of the district's bonds for financing the acquisition as an attempt to block the deal. Closing arguments take place in Palm Beach County on Thursday.

Owning vast acreage south of Lake Okeechobee presents an unprecedented opportunity for water storage and treatment, the backbone of restoration success. More reservoirs will mean fewer discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their fragile estuaries. More treatment marshes will improve delivery of cleaner water to the remnant Everglades and Everglades National Park. The once-common practice of "backpumping" water into Lake Okeechobee will become a thing of the past. These benefits clearly serve a public purpose.

At no other time, including when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was developed in the late 1990s, has acreage of this magnitude been made available to the public. Indeed, if such acreage had been available when CERP was being designed, the framework of projects for Everglades restoration would have turned out differently.

In negotiating this purchase, we at the district have modified the contract terms to reflect changing fiscal realities. We have identified key parcels for the initial acquisition. And we have used a public planning process to evaluate restoration opportunities. When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity arises, it takes vision and resolve to move forward, despite attempts by a vocal minority to throw up roadblocks. We see the vision. We are resolved to build a healthier environment for South Florida. Now is the time to make this happen.

ERIC BUERMANN, chairman

South Florida Water Management District Governing Board

Success in school begins in the home

I am a teacher, and I agree with the writer of "Education is students', teachers' responsibility" (July 10) about being over-tested from the first month of school all the way to spring break.

It seems that there is no time to actually learn anything between standardized tests. I also think that in elementary school, younger kids still are anxious to please teachers, administrators and parents. Most of them take school performance seriously, and school-based rewards such as field trips, food, carnivals, pizza parties, and prizes still have value to them. By the time they get to high school, their priorities are different, such as the color of the latest iPod. They feel that they can "catch up later," because their social life, partying, truancy or going to bed at 2 a.m. takes precedence.

Then, all of a sudden, the fear of not passing or graduating seems to move to the front burner again, sometimes resulting in repeating the grade, or dropping out altogether. The responsibility lies with everyone. Teachers can do only so much. The rest of the accountability, preparation for their success and growth must come from home.

KAREN EISMANN

Temple committee gets supplies to students

Many individuals and groups could do what the writer of "Citizens should donate supplies to schools" (July 26) suggests in her letter, regarding giving reusable and new basic school supplies to schools. For example, the Social Action Committee of Temple Beth David of Palm Beach Gardens (of which I am a member) has a partnership with Washington Elementary School in Riviera Beach. One of our programs is to collect donated school supplies from our members for the students at the school.

LENORE M. LIVINGSTON

Florida Bay ecology near collapse

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08/05/2009
Sarasota Herald-Tribune - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF

A flock of cormorants stand on polls in Florida Bay in Islamorada on July 15, 2009. A sprawling estuary at the state's southern tip, Florida Bay sits like a saucer beneath a potted plant. Much of Florida's rainwater used to end up here after filtering through the miles of muck and sawgrass of the Everglades.

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Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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08/05/2009
Washington Post - Online
Skoloff, Brian

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08/05/2009
WAWS-TV - Online
BRIAN SKOLOFF= =

Lindsay Lewe...Jacksonville...Sunset -- Islamorada, Florida Keys

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Tampa Bay Online

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Historically, the bay thrived on that perfect mix of freshwater from the Everglades and saltwater from the adjacent Gulf of Mexico. It was a virtual Garden of Eden, home to a bounty of wading birds, fish, sea grasses and sponges.

But to the north of the bay, man's unforgiving push to develop South Florida has left the land dissected with roads, dikes and miles of flood control canals to make way for homes and farms, choking off the freshwater flow and slowly killing the bay.

The ill effects extend even across the narrow spit of land that makes up the Florida Keys to the shallow coral reefs in the Atlantic Ocean. Many popular commercial fish like grouper and snapper begin their lives in the bay before migrating into the ocean to the reefs. 'If Florida Bay heads south and there's a lot less fish in there, well, when that's done, it's all over down here,' Burke says. 'When that goes, your reefs are going to go, too, and it'll just be a chain reaction. 'You could argue that the bay has already collapsed,' he adds. Algae blooms block life-giving sunlight from penetrating the water's surface. Sea grasses that filter the water and provide habitat for the food chain are dying. And some migratory birds aren't returning. 'The health of Florida Bay is very much tied to the state of the Everglades, and the Everglades isn't improving either,' says Tom Van Lent, senior scientist with the not-for-profit Everglades Foundation. 'Their fates are one and the same.' For decades, the state has struggled to find a way to restore natural flow through the Everglades and curb the pollution caused by runoff from sugar farms, cow pastures and urban sprawl. It is the largest such wetlands restoration effort ever. 'Having that water coming down from the Everglades is key,' says Rob Clift of the National Parks Conservation Association. 'It has to be restored.' Attempts to fix the Everglades by constructing water treatment marshes and reservoirs, among other things, have been dogged by politics, funding shortfalls, and contentious, litigation-filled disagreements over the best solutions. And while land has been purchased and some projects completed, key restoration components are undone. 'It's really aggravating,' Burke says. 'We've seen very little, if any, really ground breaking projects that would help change the flow into Florida Bay.' A litany of lawsuits filed by parties favoring one solution over another are partly to blame, says Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency overseeing Everglades restoration.

Name an environmental group, and the agency has been sued by them.

While pro-environment groups say their lawsuits are not designed to stop restoration but to improve projects litigation inevitably creates delays. And some plaintiffs, like Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer which farms in the Everglades, is trying to protect its business.

Wehle calls them all 'obstructionists,' including the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians who have her agency back in court Aug. 6 for closing arguments in yet another lawsuit. 'There are a handful of people that choose not to participate in this process and instead use litigation, and who is losing? The environment is losing,' Wehle says. The Miccosukee, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. In the current case, the tribe and Florida Crystals are trying to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from another sugar giant, U.S. Sugar Corp.

The water district says the deal is a historic opportunity to take sugar out of production and provide land to build much-needed reservoirs and treatment areas to clean and store water.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for restoration projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with the new land.

Florida Crystals also argues the purchase would give its main competitor an unfair business advantage. 'Meeting upon meeting, and the Everglades continues to die,' Lorion says. Back on Florida Bay, Burke just wants something done before it's too late. To the casual visitor, the area is stunning even today. But Burke knows better. 'In a lot of ways,' he says, 'it's still pristine and beautiful down here, but it's also on its last dying breath.'

Florida Bay's ecology on the brink of collapse

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He's been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world. 'Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population,' says Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

Experts fear a collapse of the entire ecosystem, threatening not only some of the nation's most popular tourism destinations - Everglades National Park and the Florida Keys - but a commercial and recreational fishery worth millions of dollars.

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WPMI-TV - Online
Contributor: Kim Mckeand

FLAD105 By BRIAN SKOLOFF= Associated Press Writer=

ISLAMORADA, Fla. (AP) - Boat captain Tad Burke looks out over Florida Bay and sees an ecosystem that's dying as politicians, land owners and environmentalists bicker.

He's been plying these waters for nearly 25 years, and has seen the declines in shrimp and lobster that use the bay as a nursery, and less of the coveted species like bonefish that draw recreational sportsmen from around the world.

"Bonefish used to be very prevalent, and now we don't see a tenth of the amount that we used to find in the bay, and even around the Keys because the habitat no longer supports the population," says Burke, head of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association.

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The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, who call the Everglades their ancestral home, have sued the water district repeatedly. It's the tribe and a few others who now have the district back in court as part of an effort to block the state's planned $536 million purchase of land in the Everglades from U.S. Sugar Corp.

Tribe spokeswoman Joette Lorion says the deal could end up costing taxpayers billions of dollars, leaving little money to pay for actual projects, and will create more delays as officials figure out exactly what to do with all the new land.

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