

Gaston Cantens: U.S. Sugar deal would divert resources from projects that will save the Everglades

By BY Gaston Cantens

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Florida Crystals supports true Everglades restoration. As the first Everglades Agricultural Area farmer to sign off on the historic Everglades Settlement Agreement nearly 15 years ago, we have wholeheartedly supported restoration; we recognize it is crucial to the long-term survival of South Florida's sustainable agriculture. With other EAA farmers, we have contributed hundreds of millions of dollars and given tens of thousands of acres of fertile farmland for restoration.

As an advocate for the construction of Everglades projects, we were compelled to challenge the South Florida Water Management District's bond validation to finance its purchase of U.S. Sugar's lands. It is a gross misuse of public funds and a departure from the Everglades restoration plan the state and federal governments and all other interested stakeholders, including farmers, have been working toward for more than a decade. The proposed deal is a roadblock to the construction of projects that would have meaningful restoration results. In fact, a massive project was under way and canceled because of this deal.

While often spoken of in platitudes about "historic opportunity" and presented as some vague, grander "vision" for restoration, the unfortunate reality of this deal is it will divert all available funding — dollars that would have gone to planned, ready-to-go projects — to purposeless land acquisition. District witnesses confirmed this in court by admitting that after incurring the purchase debt, they will have no financial ability to do anything with the land.

District officials tout their "vision" of water supply and quality resulting from this purchase, but the district's executive director admitted in court none of these benefits will flow naturally from the purchase. All require construction, operation and maintenance of massive public projects the district has no ability to undertake.

Buzzwords like "historic opportunity" and "reduced price" are used to divert attention from the fact the projects upon which the benefits are premised would, according to the district's chief engineer, cost between \$14 billion to \$17 billion to build and \$387 million to \$452 million annually to operate. The district has no plan to approach paying for this. In a time of economic strife, the public will needlessly have \$550 million to \$650 million more in debt (after issuance costs), and U.S. Sugar will continue to farm the land it "sold". This land buy will merely cancel projects that could provide meaningful restoration.

Florida Crystals has exhaustively participated in the district's public planning process and publicly proposed alternatives requiring far less land at a fraction of the total cost and providing better benefits to the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee, which is dying from severe nutrient overloads from northern basins.

We hope, regardless of the outcome of the court proceedings, the district will go back to craft a realistic and fiscally prudent plan that can actually be implemented and provide real benefits like the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan from which we have deviated as a result of this latest "silver bullet."

Cantens, a former state representative is a vice president of Florida Crystals Corp.



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