

U.S. Sugar land deal is good for South Floridians

BY DOUG PITTS

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Florida stands at a critical turning point in its stewardship of water management issues. For those of us who enjoy the recreational benefits of fishing or boating in Florida Bay and visiting Everglades National Park, it would seem quizzical that the future of the very ecosystem that allows us to enjoy a unique quality of life depends on the legal interpretation of what is defined as "public purpose."

This month, millions of people and South Florida's fragile environment stand to be affected by a decision that could be handed down in a West Palm Beach court house. The definition of "public purpose" and access to revenue bond financing used by the South Florida Water Management District are central to the acquisition of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. Obtaining this land for storing and cleaning water before it flows south to replenish Florida Bay and Everglades National Park is clearly a public purpose.

As a member of the business community and board member of the Everglades Foundation, I know how important it is to support responsible stewardship of water resources. Our quality of life, management of growth, economic viability, tourism, recreation, health of our fisheries and job creation are all tied to the smart management of water resources.

For those who have a positive vision of South Florida's future and care to understand how the current U.S. Sugar acquisition aligns with responsible resource management as well as accommodates the greater public good and our environment, it is important to focus on the benefits of the U.S. Sugar contract and support it based on its merits. When comparing this scaled-down acquisition to what was initially envisioned, we would:

- Save more than \$800 million at closing and \$65 million annually in debt service payments.
- Allow the South Florida Water Management District to reduce taxpayers' immediate investment by 60 percent.
- Generate cost savings to free up revenue over coming years for "shovel-ready" restoration projects that create jobs and deliver environmental benefits to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay.
- Increase water storage to reduce harmful freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and estuaries.
- Improve the delivery of cleaner water to the Everglades.
- Prevent tons of phosphorus from entering the Everglades.

- Reduce the need for back-pumping water into Lake Okeechobee.

There are other benefits to be realized by this once-in-a lifetime acquisition that clearly underscores how attaining U.S. Sugar land holds promises for a sustainable future. What we cannot afford to do is prolong a decision to acquire this property. South Florida residents and those who are tasked with managing our water resources lack other economically feasible options as they work toward the greater public good of saving an ecosystem that preserves and creates jobs and sustains an ecological treasure for future generations.

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