

Editorial: Saving Everglades should come first
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The state of Florida needs to be sure it does not spend \$1.75 billion to buy up farmland for Everglades restoration, just to let industrial development become a new obstacle to cleaner water.

Florida Crystals, a big landowner in the Everglades Agricultural Area, wants to put an industrial and commercial center south of Lake Okeechobee, in the general area where the state wants to create a new flowway for excess lake water.

That promises to help restore the Everglades and significantly ease pollution in the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary in Lee County, devastated by lake water in 2004 and 2005.

The state has agreed to buy 300 square miles from U.S. Sugar, the leading Florida producer, to create the flowway. Those holdings and Florida Crystals' property are intermingled, so the state would have to negotiate land swaps with Florida Crystals to put together the project.

Negotiating the swaps and creating a flowway will take years, and must not be slowed by a fight over new development in the wrong place.

The goal is to remove agriculture from parts of the "River of Grass," where it developed before the value of natural water movements was widely appreciated. The \$10 billion federal-state Everglades restoration project is deeply flawed because it lacks a southern flowway, which would send more lake water along its historic pathways, instead of flushing it into our rivers where it has caused epic environmental damage.

Now that missing piece is within our grasp, unless we blow the opportunity. We favor economic development in the farming counties where 1,700 jobs could eventually be lost in the U.S. Sugar purchase. If an industrial hub linking east and west coast ports can be built near the lake without threatening Everglades restoration, we're all for it.

But the Everglades must have priority.

Farming the area was itself a huge mistake in the first place. Water conservation, environmental protection and flood protection would all be much easier with as much as possible of the area returned to its natural condition.

That can't be entirely achieved now, but we are about to take a big step toward undoing the damage from farming — and thereby nearly destroying — one of Earth's greatest wetlands.