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Polls says Floridians back Everglades land deal

10/21/2009

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Sun Sentinel

The Everglades Foundation released a poll today that says Floridians statewide overwhelmingly support state purchase of sugar land to help preserve the Everglades.

The unsurprising results are intended to fend off any late attempts to derail the land deal.

"I think it's important to remind lawmakers that this is an issue Floridians are passionate about," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Foundation.

He warned that unspecified special interests in Tallahassee might try to "find ways to plot and scheme to derail this effort."

Completion of the land deal depends on a ruling by the state Supreme Court. The Miccosukee Tribe and sugar producer Florida Crystals are fighting the purchase, arguing that it costs taxpayers too much with no guaranteed results and that it takes money away from other Everglades projects

Restoration backers, while hoping to complete the deal, also want to show broad support for restoration to discourage commercial development in agricultural lands near the 'Glades.

The poll of 600 likely voters, conducted by The Kitchens Group, found that 75 percent support state purchase of 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar.

Some 82 percent said Everglades restoration is personally important to them.

Seventy-eight percent supported strict land-use controls in the Everglades Agricultural Area to block commercial or residential development.

Pollster Jim Kitchens said support for restoration came from likely voters in all parts of the state of both major parties as well as independents.

The Foundation paid \$10,000 for the poll. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

THE EVERGLADES Survey favoring land deal takes aim at Crist critics

10/21/2009

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A poll found strong support for the governor's sugar land deal and limits on development in Everglades farmland -- results that rankled a sugar grower with hopes of building a transportation hub.

The latest volley in the political battle over Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial \$536 million land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp. was fired Tuesday in the form of a poll bankrolled by its strongest supporters.

Commissioned by the Everglades Foundation , the poll took dead aim at the Florida Crystals Corp. , a rival grower and leading critic of the governor's land deal.

It found 75 percent of 600 likely voters statewide backed the 73,000-acre purchase and 78 percent supported "strict land-use controls" to block residential or commercial development in the farm belt southeast of Lake Okeechobee.

Crystals has a parcel of farm land in play for a proposed "inland port," one of four sites contending for a transportation and shipping hub that the Port of Palm Beach Commission is scheduled to select Wednesday.

Kirk Fordham , chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation , said the group wanted to gauge public opinion on Everglades restoration, the governor's bid to buy sugar fields for future restoration projects and other "current issues."

"The fact that the numbers are so strong against development in the area surprised me in this economic climate," Fordham said.

But Gaston Cantens, a spokesman for Florida Crystals, dismissed the results and called the timing of the release an "outrageous attempt to manipulate public opinion in order to hurt us."

Cantens said unemployment in South Bay, Pahokee and Clewiston, three rural towns that have long relied on the struggling agricultural industry, has soared to 40 percent, nearly four times the state average.

Any statewide poll dilutes strong regional support for development, he said. "Seventy-five percent of Florida do not know who Florida Crystals is, much less that we're proposing any inland port."

The Foundation and other environmental groups oppose the Crystals site because it is the only one located in a farm belt that they hope to see converted into restoration projects.

Last week, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Transportation both asked the Port of Palm Beach to postpone the selection for further study -- a request the commission rejected.

Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe have both filed challenges in the Florida Supreme Court to a plan by the South Florida Water Management District to finance the land purchase with bonds.

The Foundation paid The Kitchens Group of Orlando \$10,000 to conduct the survey, which had a margin of error of four percentage points, and was conducted from Sept. 20-24.

Pollster Jim Kitchens said he found broad support for the land deal and for efforts to restore the Everglades that crossed regions and political parties.

"There are very few issues uniting Democrats and Republicans these days," he said.

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Survey: Everglades support remains strong

10/20/2009

South Florida Business Journal

Brinkmann, Paul

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Any future efforts to derail Everglades restoration projects would be unpopular with the Florida voting public, a nonprofit environmental group said Tuesday.

The group, Everglades Foundation, polled 600 voters around the state about restoration in general and specific projects such as the purchase of 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. to be used for additional restoration.

The poll found 75 percent support the land acquisition, whereby the South Florida Water Management District would buy the acreage for \$650 million. The poll said 19 percent are opposed, with 6 percent unsure.

The poll was conducted by the Maitland-based Kitchens Group for \$10,000 and included voters of both major parties and other or no party affiliation.

Kirk Fordham, executive director of the foundation, said the poll shows that Floridians value spending on Everglades restoration, even in difficult economic times. He said the foundation provided the new poll partly out of fear that ongoing court battles or politics could derail the U.S. Sugar land purchase or other projects.

"We expect some of the special interest groups that would like to see this [land purchase] scuttled are ... trying to find ways to derail this effort," Fordham said. "We always find things get tucked in legislative vehicles that move quickly. We just want to remind folks that the political environment is such that there's widespread support for this."

In August, Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Don Hafele approved bonding for the purchase, but limited the water district to \$650 million in bonds. However, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians has appealed that approval to the Florida Supreme Court.

The poll also showed 78 percent support strict land-use controls in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) to block any future commercial or residential development.

The Port of Palm Beach is expected to vote this week to choose among four potential sites for a proposed inland port, one of which is within the EAA.

In the poll, 82 percent said combating the effects of climate change and saltwater intrusion the fresh water supply was important, which is a major reason for Everglades restoration.

In a conference call about the poll, Jim Kitchens, president of the Kitchens Group, said the results showed "people have come to an understanding that one of the biggest threats to our state is in fresh drinking water."

Other results of the poll included the following findings about Everglades restoration:

- * Ninety-one percent think it is important to protect recreational opportunities like fishing, boating, camping and hiking for individuals and families.
- * Eighty-five percent think it is important for preventing urban sprawl and congestion.
- * Ninety-two percent think it is important to protect wildlife like the Florida panther and the Southern bald eagle.
- * Eighty-three percent believe it is important for providing flood-control protection.
- * Ninety-three percent believe it is important to help save jobs in the tourism, boating and fishing industries.

Poll supports U.S. Sugar deal for Everglades restoration

10/20/2009

Palm Beach Post

Quinlan, Paul

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Three-quarters of Floridians support Gov. Charlie Crist's \$536 million bid to buy farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration, according to a poll commissioned by the deal's backers.

The Everglades Foundation's poll of 600 likely Florida voters found that of the 75 percent who support the deal, 41 percent "strongly support" it, said pollster Jim Kitchens, of The Kitchens Group.

The poll also weighed in on plans to develop an "inland port," envisioned as a sprawling transportation, warehousing and distribution hub that would serve as an off-site extension of South Florida's three seaports. The poll said 78 percent favored "strict land-use controls" in the 700,000-acre Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee, "to block any future commercial or residential development" - a clear swipe at U.S. Sugar's rival, Florida Crystals Corp., which is lobbying to develop the inland port on land in that area.

The poll carries a 4 percent margin of error.

The results show that Crist's 73,000-acre land deal with U.S. Sugar - potentially the state's most expensive conservation land deal ever - has "broad, bipartisan support," said Kitchens. The poll found 75 percent of Democrats, 75 percent of Republicans and 80 percent of those affiliated with neither party support the U.S. Sugar deal.

"There are very few issues that are uniting Democrats and Republicans these days, but this is one," said Kitchens.

Still, it remains far from certain whether the deal will close next spring, as scheduled.

A legal challenge brought by Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe, which lives in the Everglades, is headed to the Florida Supreme Court.

As a possible special legislative session approaches, opponents of Crist's land deal "are already circulating in Tallahassee to try and find ways to plot and scheme to derail this effort," said Everglades Foundation CEO Kirk Fordham.

"I think it's important to remind lawmakers that it is an issue that Floridians feel very passionately about," said Fordham. The foundation paid Kitchens \$10,000 to conduct the poll, he said.

Florida Crystals spokesman Gaston Cantens questioned the veracity of a poll sponsored by a group with a clear bias. "I'm familiar enough with polling that you can ask a question a million different ways and get the results that you want," Cantens said.

The foundation timed the poll's release to fall the day before the Port of Palm Beach is scheduled to choose a private partner to develop an inland port. Florida Crystals, owned by the Fanjuls of Palm Beach, is the only one of four contenders who wants to build in the Everglades Agricultural Area, where the company already operates its sugar mill, refinery and power plant. Restoration advocates have long wanted to boot sugar companies out of the EAA so that the farmland, which was drained over the last century, could be used to restore the flow of water from Lake Okeechobee south into the Everglades.

Referring to the 78 percent who favored blocking further development in the EAA, Cantens said: "It is unbelievable to me that that high a percentage of people would even know that Florida Crystals exists or that we're even proposing any type of inland port concept."

The poll also found that 82 percent of Floridians believe it is personally important to them to restore the Everglades. Strong majorities also agreed that it was necessary to ensure a fresh supply of drinking water, to control flooding and to preserve the state's wildlife, the poll said.

