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Total Clips: 5

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
<u>Inland port plan delayed; officials want business plans from competing sites</u>	10/22/2009	Sun Sentinel	Reid, Andy
<u>Decision on whether St. Lucie will get inland port delayed until at least December</u>	10/22/2009	TCPalm.com	ANDY REID Sun
<u>Poll Support for Everglades land deal runs afoul of sugar giant's 'inland port' proposal</u>	10/22/2009	Stuart News	
<u>Everglades deal's supporters, sugar grower clash over poll</u>	10/21/2009	McClatchy Company Washington DC Bureau	Morgan, Curtis
<u>Port commissioners hold off on choosing inland port partner</u>	10/21/2009	Palm Beach Post	Quinlan, Paul

Inland port plan delayed; officials want business plans from competing sites

[Return to Top](#)

10/22/2009
Sun Sentinel
Reid, Andy

RIVIERA BEACH - Growing environmental concerns and economic questions on Wednesday delayed a decision on where to build an industrial distribution center that could bring thousands of jobs to struggling Glades communities.

The proposed "inland port" is considered a potential economic savior for communities alongside Lake Okeechobee, where unemployment in Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay hovers near 40 percent.

But environmental concerns continue to plague the proposal to spread industrial development to western agricultural land targeted for Everglades restoration.

The Port of Palm Beach board on Wednesday decided to wait until Dec. 17 to make a decision, calling for the competing sites to submit business plans to show why they should be chosen.

Land owned by sugar giant Florida Crystals in western Palm Beach County is competing against two sites near Clewiston and another west of Port St. Lucie.

The distribution center would connect coastal ports from Miami to Palm Beach County, delivering cargo to and from the coast via truck routes and rail lines crisscrossing the state and linking with routes to the rest of the country.

With steep unemployment in long-suffering Glades communities, residents can't afford to wait any longer, Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker said.

"We have been playing with this thing for two or three years," Whitaker said about the selection process. "We need jobs ... We are not going to please everybody."

Environmental groups oppose the Florida Crystals site, saying it threatens to get in the way off efforts to buy agricultural land that would be used to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Gov. Charlie Crist is pushing a half-billion-dollar deal to buy 73,000 acres from Florida Crystals' rival U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. The land north and west of the Florida Crystals site would be used to build a system of reservoirs and treatment areas to clean, store and deliver water for the Everglades.

Before Wednesday's planned inland port site selection vote, the state Department of Community Affairs sent an 11th-hour letter raising concerns that industrial development at Florida Crystals "could have potential negative impacts on natural resources" and lead to "urban sprawl."

Florida Crystals attorney Cliff Hertz said concerns raised by state officials are part of "larger political" backlash to Florida Crystals going to court to challenge the cost of the governor's \$536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar.

"At the end, we will be successful," Hertz said about Florida Crystals' push for industrial development.

That proposed development would start with 318 acres under the Florida Crystals proposal, but could spread to thousands of acres if the inland port succeeds.

Environmental groups support the potential job creation of an inland port, but not in areas that could get in the way of restoration, said Richard Grosso, of the Everglades Law Center. Choosing a site that triggers a legal challenge from the state or environmental groups will just delay job creation, Grosso told port board members.

"The way to get there is not to ignore those [environmental] issues," Grosso said.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

Decision on whether St. Lucie will get inland port delayed until at least December

[Return to Top](#)

10/22/2009

TCPalm.com

ANDY REID Sun

Posted October 21, 2009 at 1 a.m. , updated October 21, 2009 at 9:58 p.m.

RIVIERA BEACH — St. Lucie County residents will have to wait a couple more months to learn whether the Treasure Coast will be selected to house a proposed inland port.

The Port of Palm Beach board decided Wednesday to wait until Dec. 17 to make a decision, calling for the competing sites to submit business plans to show why they should be chosen. Those plans are due by Dec. 10.

The Treasure Coast Intermodal Campus, which is located west of Port St. Lucie, is one of four finalists for the industrial distribution center that could bring thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in new state and local tax revenue to the winning location.

Two of the finalists are near Clewiston and the third is in western Palm Beach County, which is owned by sugar giant Florida Crystals.

The St. Lucie County location, which would house a center that includes a freight yard that could have 20,000 jobs, received public support from Port St. Lucie and Fort Pierce officials. The campus is the only finalist on the Treasure Coast and would be on a 7,000-acre piece of land that fronts Glades Cutoff Road and the rail line in western St. Lucie County.

The distribution center would connect coastal ports from Miami to Palm Beach County, delivering cargo to and from the coast via truck routes and rail lines crisscrossing the state and linking with routes to the rest of the country.

The project must be completed before the opening of the expanded Panama Canal, which is slated for 2014. Once the canal is expanded, more high-volume container vessels will have direct access to the eastern United States, according

to the district.

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Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers staff writer Eric Pfahler contributed to this report.

Poll Support for Everglades land deal runs afoul of sugar giant's 'inland port' proposal

[Return to Top](#)

10/22/2009

Stuart News

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 farmland 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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Everglades deal's supporters, sugar grower clash over poll

10/21/2009

[Return to Top](#)

McClatchy Company Washington DC Bureau

Morgan, Curtis

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Read more at MiamiHerald.com

Port commissioners hold off on choosing inland port partner

10/21/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post

Quinlan, Paul

The Port of Palm Beach put off choosing who will develop the inland port Wednesday, bowing to pressures from Tallahassee and South Florida's two larger ports.

Port of Palm Beach commissioners voted 4-1 to ask the four companies vying for the potentially lucrative development deal - who made presentations to the port commission last week - to come back later with business plans, so that the selection originally scheduled for today can be made at the commission's Dec. 17 meeting.

"It only makes sense to do the business plan first," said Commission Chair Ed Oppel.

Port Commissioner Jean Enright voted no, fearing the move would delay needed job creation in the impoverished Glades communities, where three of the four developers have proposed sites.

The decision marks a reversal from the port's decision last week to move forward as scheduled, despite letters from the state's Department of Transportation and Department of Environmental Protection. The agencies said that more study was needed.

The inland port concept calls for building a sprawling transportation, warehousing and distribution hub of at least 3,500 acres to serve as an off-site expansion of South Florida's three seaports, an industrial campus located far inland to which shipping containers could be sent by road or rail for breakdown and redistribution.

The four companies competing to partner with the state and build the inland port include some corporate and political heavyweights, including U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals, former Sen. Mel Martinez and former State Senate President Ken Pruitt. The latter two are partnered with a company pitching a site in St. Lucie County.

The Port of Palm Beach says an inland port is needed to enable Florida to attract some of the mega-freighter traffic that is expected to begin moving from Asia to the Eastern U.S. through the Panama Canal, which is undergoing widening that is expected to be completed in 2014.

The state's growth management agency on Thursday denied land use changes the Palm Beach County Commission approved for the Florida Crystals site south of Lake Okeechobee in western Palm Beach County. Among other things, the agency cited state environmental regulators' concerns that development there could interfere with Everglades restoration.

