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Total Clips: 5

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Everglades poll: Do you hate the US Sugar deal, or really hate it?	12/21/2009	Sun Sentinel	Hafenbrack, Josh
Poll: Floridians dislike Crist's Glades-Sugar deal	12/21/2009	Miami Herald - Tallahassee Bureau, The	Caputo, Marc
Dueling polls: Floridians do, don't support Everglades land purchase	12/21/2009	South Florida Business Journal	Brinkmann, Paul
 Hope for the Everglades	12/19/2009	New York Times	
PAHOKEE JOURNAL: A Town's			
 Hopes (and Doubts) Ride on a New Marina	12/19/2009	New York Times	Cave, Damien

Everglades poll: Do you hate the US Sugar deal, or really hate it?

[Return to Top](#)

12/21/2009
Sun Sentinel
Hafenbrack, Josh

Associated Industries of Florida is touting the results of a new Zogby poll as proof that Floridians overwhelmingly oppose Gov. Charlie Crist's U.S. Sugar land purchase in the Everglades.

One problem: The poll question itself steered respondents to a predictable answer.

"Do you support or oppose the state government spending \$536 million of taxpayer's money to buy 73,000 acres of farmland from US Sugar Corporation in the Everglades and then leasing it back to the same company?" the pollsters asked.

Sheesh. Who would support that?

Not many, apparently. Among 801 poll respondents, a whopping 86 percent opposed the deal as framed in the survey, while just 11 percent supported. (When environmentalists framed the same issue in friendly terms to their cause, the results were flipped.)

It's a case study in how polls results can be guided by question wording.

In the Zogby poll, another question about the election of water management district board members used a similar, if slightly more subtle, tactic.

"Do you favor or oppose having the members of your local water management district boards chosen by the people, in an election, instead of political appointments by the Governor, the way it is now?" the pollsters asked.

Not surprisingly, respondents came down firmly on the side of "the people" and against politics, 72 percent-16 percent.

Poll: Floridians dislike Crist's Glades-Sugar deal

12/21/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Miami Herald - Tallahassee Bureau, The
Caputo, Marc

Associated Industries of Florida has posted results of a new Zogby International poll showing that Floridians largely oppose Gov. Charlie Crist's decision to buy 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land for \$536 million and then lease it back to the company.

Only 11 percent support it, with 86 percent are opposed. [More here](#)

The results would seem to conflict with a Florida Everglades Foundation survey of a few months back. There, 75 percent of Floridians seemed to support the deal compared with 18 percent who didn't.

But there's a big difference in the polls. The questions themselves. Here's what AIF asked: Do you support or oppose the state government spending \$536 million of taxpayer's money to buy 73,000 acres of farmland from US Sugar Corporation in the Everglades and then leasing it back to the same company?

Here's what the Everglades Foundation asked: Gov. Charlie Crist recently announced that the South Florida Water Management District will be purchasing 73,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar for the purpose of restoring the Everglades.

Also, the Everglades Foundation poll question followed a number of other survey questions about the importance of protecting wildlife, the economy and drinking-water supplies. So by the time respondents were asked if they generally supported "restoring the Everglades" the placement of the previous questions (as well as the question itself) could have made a difference.

As for the AIF poll, it has a glaring omission. It doesn't point out that the Sugar buyout money is from property taxes in the 16-county South Florida Water Management District. It won't be paid by taxpayers statewide -- that is those who live north, east and west of Orange County (the northern-most border of the district).

Dueling polls: Floridians do, don't support Everglades land purchase

12/21/2009

[Return to Top](#)

South Florida Business Journal
Brinkmann, Paul

Depending on which poll you believe, Floridians either love or hate the proposed state buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s 73,000 acres.

Associated Industries of Florida said in a news release Monday that a new poll from Zogby International finds 75 percent of Florida residents oppose the \$536 million land purchase.

But, in October, the Everglades Foundation said its poll, conducted by Maitland-based Kitchens Group, showed 75 percent support the deal.

AIF is a nonprofit organization that has opposed the purchase, while the Everglades Foundation is among its chief supporters.

AIF said in its news release that Zogby conducted its telephone poll of 801 randomly selected, likely general election voters throughout Florida, and the poll had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent.

The Everglades Foundation said its October poll asked 600 voters statewide about Everglades projects, and it had a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The polls aren't cheap. The foundation said it paid \$10,000.

According to the AIF news release, voters were "given the choice of how to use more than \$500 million for Everglades restoration," to which 86 percent said they don't support the multimillion-dollar plan to purchase additional land.

"Florida is facing another lean budget year, with a \$2 billion-plus shortfall," said Barney Bishop, president and CEO of AIF, in the release. "In these tough economic times, this magnitude of government spending could be better utilized for job creation or other economic stimulus measures."

Gov. Charlie Crist announced the land purchase deal, and the board of the South Florida Water Management District approved the sales contract.

AIF also took aim at the appointment of board members for water districts. In its news release, it said 72 percent of respondents support an election of water management board members, while 16 percent prefer the current appointment method.

Hope for the Everglades

12/19/2009

[Return to Top](#)

New York Times

A one-mile bridge does not sound like a big project, any more than \$81 million sounds like big money. But the recent groundbreaking for a one-mile, \$81 million bridge on Florida's Tamiami Trail was a huge event for people who care about the Everglades. It was one more encouraging sign that the effort to restore South Florida's ecosystem remains alive.

The bridge project will raise one section of the Tamiami Trail's roadbed to allow water to begin flowing into the Everglades and south to Florida Bay — much as it did before commercial development, canals and roadways deprived the Everglades of the freshwater flows that had made it one of the richest ecosystems on Earth.

The bridge symbolizes the Obama administration's determination to get cracking on the \$8 billion (now \$12 billion) Everglades restoration project approved by Congress in 2000. The project was supposed to be a 50-50 deal shared by Florida and the federal government, but Washington has failed to honor the bargain. The state has provided \$2.4 billion, the feds only one-fifth of that.

Now, not just the bridge but other federally financed projects are leaping off the drawing boards. Two important wetlands restoration projects on the state's southwest and southeast coasts are to begin early next year.

There are two reasons for the change. One is an infusion of federal cash. The administration included more than \$100 million for Everglades restoration in the stimulus package, and Congress anted up another \$100 million. The other is an infusion of high-level interest. Carol Browner, President Obama's top environmental adviser, is a longtime Everglades champion. Ken Salazar, the secretary of the interior, is equally committed. The notoriously dysfunctional Army Corps of Engineers, which will have to do much of the actual work, is finally in the hands of people who care.

Other sections of the trail must be elevated, other projects begun. Gov. Charlie Crist's ambitious plan to buy and retire from production thousands of acres of sugar cane fields north of the park must be brought to fruition. (The deal would reduce pollution and provide room for reservoirs to store water that could be released during the dry season.)

The Office of Management and Budget wants major cuts in Everglades spending next year. The White House should resist them. Re-establishing momentum has not been easy, and it would be silly to arrest it now.

PAHOKEE JOURNAL: A Town's Hopes (and Doubts) Ride on a New Marina

[Return to Top](#)

12/19/2009

New York Times

Cave, Damien

PAHOKEE, Fla. — When Palm Beach County announced a few months ago that unemployment in this small farm town had reached “depression levels” of more than 30 percent, residents were not surprised. Pahokee these days produces two things: college football prospects and nostalgia for a time when work was plentiful.

But just past the shuttered stores downtown, and over the 33-foot dike keeping Lake Okeechobee in check, sits both a dream of prosperity and a culture clash in the making. It may look like just a marina and a campground, but with construction nearly completed, the Lake Okeechobee Outpost has become a test of whether the exuberance of coastal Florida can find a home in the state’s agricultural heart.

Hal Stankard is the outpost’s general manager. In a town of muddy pickups, he drives a Toyota Prius, wears golf shirts the color of citrus and sees the marina as a stopover for the hundreds of boaters who use the lake to cross from one Florida coast to the other.

“This is going to be the introduction of economic help for the whole area,” Mr. Stankard said recently, staring at the marina from an empty building that will be a Tiki bar and upscale restaurant in a few months. “Think about what it will be like if we can fill this place with 80, 90 boats, yachts even.”

The main lobby looked ready, with its new oil paintings of cowboys and a flat-screen television tuned to Fox News. But there were only three small boats in the marina. At least one was owned by the police.

Mr. Stankard said more would come when the bar’s taps started flowing and a dredging project near the lake’s shore was finished, but many here seem unable to share his vision.

William Moe, 71, a longtime resident who was fishing at the marina with a rod that had no reel, said he doubted the project would do much good.

“I think it’s a crazy idea,” he said. “There ain’t nothing in this town. You can’t buy a pair of socks in this town. You ever been to a town where you can’t buy a pair of socks?”

Like many here, Mr. Moe, with his molasses drawl and deep wrinkles, seemed broken by the consequences of economic decline. He said his grandson had been shot and killed outside a convenience store about a month ago, part of an increase in crime that has generally tracked with the recession.

It was not always so rough, Mr. Moe and others said. For much of the 20th century, Pahokee — derived from Pa-Hay-Okee, which means “grassy water” in Seminole — had been one of the many towns in Central Florida that thrived because of its nutrient-rich, ink-dark soil known as muck. The town was labeled “the winter vegetable capital of the world” at one point, and as recently as a generation ago, most of Pahokee’s roughly 6,000 residents seemed to have a job, at least during the harvest.

“Everybody was working,” said Henry Crawford, Pahokee’s vice mayor, who has lived here most of his life, except for a tour in Vietnam. “In the ‘60s and ‘70s, it was Christmas every day.”

Agricultural mechanization changed all that. Sugar replaced vegetables, and machines replaced workers. In the 1990s, the last wave of Caribbean workers stopped showing up for the harvest, and the local economy collapsed. In 2000, the census showed, a third of Pahokee lived below the poverty line.

Standing outside a trailer that serves as City Hall, Mr. Crawford ticked off the closed businesses as if they were dead relatives: “A Ford dealership, Chevrolet, restaurants — a Burger King, a KFC — filling stations,” he said. “We had everything.”

City, county and state officials have pushed repeatedly for the town’s revival, and the marina has become a cornerstone of that effort. Their ambitions are visible in the signs at the entrance that list public officials below proud declarations like “American jobs, American values” and “higher-skill, higher-wage job opportunities in your community.”

The signs, however, are from 2006. Three years later, plywood peeks out from behind the paint and Mr. Stankard has 11 employees — nine from Pahokee, he said, and most in maintenance.

He said the company he works for, Seven Kings Holdings Inc., which owns 10 other marinas in Florida, had been trying to reach out. The outpost will host its second annual free Christmas dinner on Saturday night for around 700 needy residents. But whether such efforts — along with the tax revenue from the marina and its cottages and campground — will be enough to keep people happy is an open question.

From the start, residents in this mostly black town have expressed fears that the upgraded site ("like Disney but rustic," Mr. Stankard said) would be only for wealthier outsiders. When a group of residents were told to stop fishing near the edge of the marina a few months ago, it seemed to confirm some people's fears of being pushed aside.

But Diane Harvey, 53, one of the people asked to move along, said that it was because of work being done on the dike, and that some of her neighbors' fears were misguided. "I can obey the rules," she said. "It's for the betterment of the town."

Mr. Crawford said most people had come around to a similar view, once they learned that the marina was on public land, for use by all. Generally though, Pahokee residents seem resigned to having little choice but to compete for the same tourists and snowbirds as the rest of the state.

"It'll be for the higher-up group, not the people in Pahokee," said Georgia Jones, 66, the owner of Poppa Jimmy's Catfish and More. "But that's all we got to hope for — pulling people in."

