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Total Clips: 4

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Politicians migrate to Everglades restoration conference	01/07/2010	Palm Beach Post	Quinlan, Paul
Everglades Advocates Push for Restoration Progress	01/07/2010	Southeast Construction	Andy Reid
Everglades advocates gathering to push for restoration progress	01/07/2010	Sun Sentinel	
ENVIRONMENTALISTS UNEASY AS EVERGLADES POW WOW BEGINS	01/07/2010	Palm Beach Post	QUINLAN, PAUL

Politicians migrate to Everglades restoration conference

[Return to Top](#)

01/07/2010

Palm Beach Post

Quinlan, Paul

Don't expect a mob of paparazzi, but a major annual Everglades conference has come to town — and with it, appearances (and potentially conspicuous absences) by a few big-name politicians.

The Everglades Coalition Conference, now in its 25th year, runs four days starting Thursday at the PGA National Resort & Spa. This one falls 10 years after the landmark state and federal agreement to partner on a massive Everglades restoration plan and split the now-\$12.5 billion estimated price tag 50-50.

The theme is "The Changing Face of Everglades Restoration" and the mood, anxious.

The state had outspent the federal government about 6-to-1 until this year, when the Obama Administration pumped hundreds of million of dollars into the Everglades, ending the long drought of the Bush presidency. Meanwhile, Gov. Charlie Crist expects to close on his blockbuster Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. this year.

But the prospect of a Marco Rubio Senate win (one activist called Rubio's Everglades record in the state legislature "abominable") and a Republican take-back of Congress could mean more setbacks for the high-cost restoration effort, some environmentalists say.

So could a shift of Obama administration priorities from stimulus spending to deficit reduction, a change he's expected to emphasize in his upcoming State of the Union address. The handful of ranking Obama appointees in from Washington for the conference can expect to be pressed to pledge support.

"We want to see that the commitment is there going into the second and third year of his term," said Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation.

The boldfaced names in attendance will not include Crist, even though he accepted an award at last year's conference and gave the primetime, Saturday night keynote speech touting his plan to buy swaths of farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration.

The deal, announced in June 2008, has been increasingly derided as a favor to Crist's backers at U.S. Sugar, and twice downsized by Crist himself because of the its \$536 million price. It's expected to close by June of this year.

But is Crist, the once proud moderate, worried about sullyng his conservative credentials? Environmentalists still love it but will want to hear the feds renew their commitment to include the planned purchase of 73,000 acres of sugar land in the 50-50 calculus.

Crist's rival in the Senate race primary, Rubio, is not expected to attend, either.

This year the Saturday night keynote goes to Congressman Tom Rooney, the Tequesta Republican whose district includes portions of the Glades and the farm-heavy regions of the Kissimmee north of Lake Okeechobee. Farmers and Everglades advocates often don't see eye-to-eye, so attendees will be eager to hear what he has to say. The freshman congressman's record on the Everglades is largely undefined, save for his leaping aboard the anti-Burmese Python bandwagon earlier this year.

Florida Senate President Jeff Atwater is scheduled to speak at the conference. So will Congressman Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton. They're on for Friday morning and afternoon, respectively.

Sen. Bill Nelson will address attendees Thursday night. Former Senator and longtime Everglades devotee Bob Graham will speak Saturday afternoon, alongside state chief financial officer and Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Alex Sink, a newcomer.

Everglades Advocates Push for Restoration Progress

01/07/2010

Southeast Construction

Andy Reid

digital wire

[Return to Top](#)

Jan. 7--Flying low over the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee, Everglades advocates look out the window and visualize the time before sugar cane fields and cities blocked the life-giving flow of lake water that once drifted slowly south.

Decades of draining, dike building and water pumping allowed agriculture and development to take over vast swaths of former Everglades land, choking off the flow of water to Florida's famed "River of Grass."

To protect and revive what remains, environmentalists and state water managers propose to buy sugar cane land and build a series of reservoirs and treatment areas that could artificially re-create water flows that once naturally cascaded to the Everglades.

On Wednesday, the Everglades Coalition led aerial tours of the land south of Lake Okeechobee targeted for restoration. The flights -- passing over a mix of suburbia, farmland, an unfinished reservoir and a sprawling wildlife refuge -- show the hurdles and possibilities of long-stalled Everglades restoration.

The flights came on the eve of the 25th annual Everglades Coalition Conference. Environmentalists and state and federal officials will gather in Palm Beach Gardens to discuss ways to make progress on long-debated, multibillion-dollar restoration plans.

Ten years after unveiling a coordinated state and federal Everglades restoration plan, "we weren't as far along as we would have hoped," said Sara Fain, national co-chairwoman for the Everglades Coalition.

Now, with plans for a \$500 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. moving along and President Barack Obama's administration helping to get more federal money flowing for construction, the Everglades Coalition hopes to use its conference to jump-start efforts.

"We have this window of opportunity to show success," said Fain, of the National Parks Conservation Association. "We have a really good opportunity to protect Lake Okeechobee and get the Everglades back to a working ecosystem."

Critics counter that the Everglades Coalition and the proposed U.S. Sugar land deal put restoration on the wrong track.

The Miccosukee Tribe and sugar producer Florida Crystals are waging a legal battle to try to derail the proposed \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar. They argue that the deal costs South Florida taxpayers too much

and takes money from other long-delayed Everglades restoration efforts.

The coalition's annual gathering has become "all for show," said Dexter Lehtinen, Everglades advocate and attorney for the Miccosukee Tribe.

"It's a cover for destructive behavior," Lehtinen said. "Say good things, get an 'attaboy' and go out and do whatever you want."

The political heavyweights scheduled to speak at the Everglades Coalition conference include: Sen. Bill Nelson; Florida Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, who is running for governor; the state's top environmental official, Mike Sole, who leads the Department of Environmental Protection; and U.S. Assistant Interior Secretary Thomas Strickland, a top Obama administration environmental official.

Environmental groups will be looking for state and federal officials to support more money for Everglades restoration projects.

Also, the spread of industrial development south of Lake Okeechobee -- including rock mines and Florida Crystals' proposed "inland port" industrial distribution center -- threatens to get in the way of restoration benefits that the U.S. Sugar deal could bring, Fain said.

The conference has long been "a place for federal and state leaders to come down and swear their allegiance to Everglades restoration," said Eric Draper, of Audubon of Florida.

"Anybody can say they love the Everglades. It's the dollars that really make the difference."

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

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Everglades advocates gathering to push for restoration progress

01/07/2010
Sun Sentinel

[Return to Top](#)

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INFORMATIONAL BOX:

If you go

What: Everglades Coalition Conference

When: Thursday through Sunday at the PGA Resort and Spa, 400 Avenue of Champions, Palm Beach Gardens

Cost: Registration begins at 1 p.m. Thursday. Cost is \$110 per day, or \$190 for the full conference (meals not included)

Keynote address: 6 p.m. Thursday by Sen. Bill Nelson

More information: evergladescoalition.org

PHOTO: Wednesday's air tour surveys the U.S. Sugar mill in Clewiston, looking southeast across cane fields. The mill figures in a multimillion-dollar state plan to obtain land for Everglades restoration.

Mark Randall, Sun Sentinel

Many environmentalists hope the sugar land in the distance, south of Lake Okeechobee, will become a key part of efforts to restore water flows to the Everglades if a proposed state land purchase survives legal challenges. This is how it looked during an aerial tour on Wednesday.

Mark Randall, Sun Sentinel photos

A view of the Okeelanta sugar mill, looking north across sugar cane fields toward Lake Okeechobee.

Map: Unfinished business. SOURCE: South Florida Water Management District. Kwency Norman Sun Sentinel

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[Return to Top](#)

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~paul_quinlan@pbpost.com

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