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Florida's Supreme Court fired off a ruling today that consolidates the outstanding legal challenges to Gov. Charlie Crist's half-billion-dollar Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp., setting the stage for a final courtroom showdown in Tallahassee on April 7. Supporters of the deal, who petitioned for the move, declared today's order a small victory. The court essentially said it would rule at once on both the central case and a parallel challenge now before the Third District Court of Appeal, bringing the whole case under its one roof.

The \$536 million land deal calls for buying 73,000 acres with bonds issued by the South Florida Water Management District. The land is to be used to re-create the historic flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the southern Everglades.

The two opponents to the deal — U.S. Sugar Corp. rival Florida Crystals, owned by the Fanjuls of Palm Beach, and the Miccosukee Indian Tribe, who live on a reservation in the Everglades — pain the deal as a taxpayer-funded boondoggle intended to bailout a sugar company and burnish the governor's enviro-cred. Both parties took the case to the Supreme Court and simultaneously filed an administrative challenge with the South Florida Water Management District, which was sent to the appeals court after the district rejected it.

"That potentially could have been a thorn in our side," said Thom Rumberger, general counsel for the Everglades Foundation. "We're very, very happy."

The late court date will mean that the South Florida Water Management District will again have to vote on a contract extension (most likely in March), which tees up another chance for opponents to derail the deal. Both Rumberger and U.S. Sugar, in a press release, were optimistic that the closing date could be pushed back.

The only remaining hurdle, assuming the deal passes Supreme Court muster, would be ensuring that the purchase does not cut too deeply into the district's budget. A opt-out clause in the contract says that if the expense, amid today's tumbling property tax collections, proves too much for the district, the deal is off.

