

## Guest commentary: U.S. Sugar land needed for Everglades restoration

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Restoration of the Picayune Strand to restore natural water flows is well under way today — the first official project of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and one of the heretofore “missing pieces” of restoration. While celebrating, it should be noted that this restoration would not be happening if the land had never been acquired.

Many times during the 24 years that it took to track down and convince 17,000 landowners to sell, acquisition did seem to be an overwhelming, impractical, expensive task and — yes — it was controversial. It took more than \$155 million and a lot of perseverance. The effort was worth every hour and every dollar.

On Thursday, the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board is being asked to reaffirm the worth of restoring other parts of the Everglades and to recommit to an agreement to buy 73,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar. That commitment, too, is expensive — \$536 million — and controversial, and the land to be acquired is another “missing piece” of restoration.

Make no mistake, that U.S. Sugar land is needed to store water for agricultural and urban uses during the dry season and, during the rainy season, to filter farm and urban runoff so it can be released south into the River of Grass where it is needed and to eliminate the destructive and polluting releases that are currently made west into the Caloosahatchee River and estuary. Restoration of habitat will benefit numerous species of Florida’s native wildlife. The governing board should, indeed it must, reaffirm its commitment — if the long-term goals of Everglades restoration are to be achieved.

For two years opponents have attacked the deal relentlessly, but offered no alternatives. There has been no other “willing seller” step forward with a better deal or land swap. Initially the purchase agreement was a “buy it all” proposal, \$1.75 billion for 187,000 acres, a railroad, refinery and citrus processing plant. Assets the water-management district did not need were to be resold to offset the expense of buying land that was and is needed.

Deservedly, Gov. Charlie Crist was praised for his expansive vision and bold initiative. He also deserves praise for, in the face of the national recession and Wall Street’s disarray, responsibly changing the deal to acquire only those lands immediately needed and secure an option on the rest. That contract, which needs to be extended because of delays generated by opponents, also includes an escape clause if, in fact, the deal

proves to be unaffordable. Ultimately, affordability depends on market conditions and terms when bonds are validated by the Florida Supreme Court.

The Florida Wildlife Federation and Defenders of Wildlife have long held their own long-range vision and commitment to landscape-scale restoration. Former federation executive director Johnny Jones and board member Arthur R. Marshall led the early efforts to empower the state not only to buy environmentally sensitive lands, but also to restore the Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee and to re-establish the flow of water that is the River of Grass. Defenders recognize this purchase as a critical component of ecosystem restoration which benefits both the economy and the environment, including endangered species. Defenders' professional publications demonstrate the economic benefits of conservation lands.

We are now urging the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District to stay its course and extend the contract. We are confident of the multiple benefits to Southwest Florida and the rest of southern Florida.



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