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Total Clips: 3

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
<a href="#"><u>South Florida water managers try to hold tax rate steady, salvage land deal</u></a>	06/10/2010	Sun Sentinel	Reid, Andy
<a href="#"><u>EDITORIAL: Water Quality Crisis Requires Action, Not Talk</u></a>	06/10/2010	Charlotte Sun Herald	
<a href="#"><u>EDITORIAL: Where are the Glades jobs? Since port withdrew on inland site, state must step in</u></a>	06/09/2010	Palm Beach Post	

### South Florida water managers try to hold tax rate steady, salvage land deal

[Return to Top](#)

06/10/2010  
Sun Sentinel  
Reid, Andy

A worsening budget crunch and pressure from federal judges to speed up Everglades restoration so far haven't soured South Florida water managers on a half-billion dollar land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

The South Florida Water Management District on Wednesday started wading through its more than \$1 billion budget plan, discussing ways to cut expenses while continuing to guard against flooding, protect water supplies and lead Everglades restoration.

The district now faces "difficult and sobering" budget decisions, said Executive Director Carol Wehle.

"Our tax base is dropping dramatically," Wehle said. "We have cut into the bone this year."

District staffers said Wednesday that they are not recommending the board consider raising property tax rates to deal with the budget woes.

The current plan calls for sticking with the tax rate of about 62 cents per \$1,000 of taxable value for most of its 16-county region.

For a \$230,000 home with a \$50,000 homestead exemption, district taxes would cost residents in Broward and Palm Beach counties about \$112 a year.

The district also proposes setting aside as much as \$321 million that could be used to salvage the land deal with U.S. Sugar or address the judges' concerns.

Declining tax revenue amid the struggling economy have jeopardized the pending deal to pay U.S. Sugar \$536 million for 73,000 acres that would be used to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

In addition to a drop in tax revenue, two federal judges this spring issued blistering critiques of Florida's efforts to fulfill Everglades restoration and water quality requirements.

The district was ordered to resume construction on a costly reservoir in southwestern Palm Beach County. The agency contends the reservoir doesn't fit in with restoration plans being reshaped by the U.S. Sugar deal.

The district still hopes to dodge the expense of finishing the reservoir, which already cost taxpayers almost \$280 million. The agency instead wants to use that land west of U.S. 27 for water treatment in conjunction with construction envisioned for the U.S. Sugar land.

The district also is awaiting a Florida Supreme Court ruling on whether there is a valid public purpose to borrow money for the U. S. Sugar deal.

Opponents, led by rival sugar grower Florida Crystals, contend the U.S. Sugar deal would cost taxpayers too much and would take money away from other Everglades efforts.

Setting aside the \$321 million reserve for potential land costs and capital projects helps the district preserve its options until officials have to make spending decisions in time for a July budget deadline.

The contract with U.S. Sugar expires in September.

"There's a tremendous amount of uncertainty," said board member Shannon Estenoz. "I think we've got to set this money aside now."

The district is expecting \$63 million less in property tax revenue for next year. Funding has dropped by almost \$300 million in the past two years.

"Things have changed. We are in very challenging times financially," said district board member Charles Dauray, who called for "fiscal prudence."

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## **EDITORIAL: Water Quality Crisis Requires Action, Not Talk**

06/10/2010

Charlotte Sun Herald

[Return to Top](#)

OUR POSITION: Water, not oil, is the commodity Florida should have been chasing.

Why is it that our elected officials in Tallahassee prefer telling us what they would do in a new job rather than doing the job they have now?

The latest wannabe problem-solver is Attorney General Bill McCollum, , the Republican frontrunner in the governor's race, who said on Thursday he would form a commission to solve Florida's approaching water supply crisis. McCollum didn't seem as concerned about water in Florida when he joined the lockstep, bipartisan opposition to complying with the federal Clean Water Act. McCollum threatened to sue the feds following the settlement of a lawsuit over the state's failure to establish pollution standards for its waterways. Now he's so serious about clean water, he's going to appoint a commission. Meanwhile, the numeric standards are set to be finalized by Oct. 15.

In Charlie Crist's four years as attorney general (half of which he spent running for governor) and three-plus years as governor (all of which he has spent running for vice president or the U.S. Senate), he has talked a lot about the environment, but his chief successes have been continuing funding for the federal-state Everglades restoration and a poorly executed proposed purchase of U. S. Sugar property. He missed a chance to enact stronger pollution controls, require more water conservation or implement stricter design standards for new commercial or residential development. All were recommended in a report issued by the 2008 Water Congress, a project of the Legislature-backed Century Commission. Crist not only skipped the three-day conference, his administration has ignored its recommendations.

We understand the short-term political considerations in play that convince lawmakers they must fight strict pollution standards. But that doesn't make stonewalling good policy. The City of Jacksonville is still trying to repair the damaged caused by decades of pumping raw sewage, industrial chemicals and other pollutants into the St. Johns River. A 10-year, \$400 million program is now under way. Years after Charlotte Harbor and Lemon Bay were declared "impaired" waterways, there is still no comprehensive plan to reverse that status. The waterways that feed them are still the primary sources of potable water for the communities in the watershed.

Despite the lack of statewide progress, there have been some promising successes locally. Charlotte County has invested millions in pipelines to deliver treated wastewater for irrigation. Sarasota has been a leader in fertilizer reduction measures (with Charlotte following suit the next year). The Southwest Florida Water Management District (somewhat insulated from fickle public opinion due to its mission and make-up) has aggressively pursued conservation and water quality policies, even when they come at a cost to local governments. Conservation is by far the cheapest source of water supply because the infrastructure is already in place.

We must come to grips with the fact that maintaining water quality and ensuring future supply has a price tag. For too long, we have collectively refused to pay that price. The bill is now coming due, but our leaders have too often chosen the easier path of denial and delay.

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## **EDITORIAL: Where are the Glades jobs? Since port withdrew on inland site, state must step in**

[Return to Top](#)

06/09/2010

Palm Beach Post

The Port of Palm Beach's failure to deliver on its inland port concept means that the state must deliver on its promise of jobs for the Glades.

If the state doesn't act, the region could be dotted with privately developed rail cargo hubs. The state's role would be to assure that one site linked by rail and highways to South Florida's major ports delivers thousands of jobs in the region that otherwise will suffer as U.S. Sugar cuts jobs after the sale of its land for Everglades restoration.

Port of Palm Beach commissioners gave up their fanciful project after the commission's chosen site, owned by sugar grower Florida Crystals, withdrew over environmental issues. Florida Crystals has vowed to build instead on a nearby site that wouldn't pose a risk to the environment.

But Florida Crystals is not alone in considering a private cargo hub. Landowners in western St. Lucie County, Hendry County and Glades County are in a race with Florida Crystals to line up national distributors and developers with the expertise to oversee the project. The result could be a hodgepodge of smaller cargo hubs and warehouse districts that fail to deliver the thousands of jobs envisioned with an inland port.

The state's contribution is to assure rail connections, which could free up eastern rail lines for passenger service and reduce highway traffic. The state also can make sure that jobs come to the region, either in western Palm Beach County where the cities struggle with 40 percent unemployment, or in Clewiston, the town U.S. Sugar built.

The state, not the Port of Palm Beach, is best positioned to assure the participation of all South Florida ports and to untangle transportation roadblocks. The need for jobs is urgent. What we need now is urgency from the state.

