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US to spend \$89 million on Everglades protection

07/20/2010
Associated Press (AP)
MIKE SCHNEIDER

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KISSIMMEE, Fla. (AP) — The federal government will spend \$89 million to preserve almost 26,000 acres of wild ranch land in a northern swath of the Florida Everglades in one of the biggest expenditures of its kind, officials said Monday.

Under the plan, the federal government will acquire the right to protect wetlands in the Fisheating Creek watershed located in Florida's rural Highlands County, although the four ranching families who own the properties will keep title to the land. The outlay represents a quarter of what the federal government will spend this year as part of its Wetlands Reserve Program. It also is one of the largest contiguous easement purchases in the history of the program.

The program was set up 20 years ago to encourage private landowners to retire agricultural land so that wetlands can be restored or protected, and it typically makes purchases of around 250 acres a year per state. However, that average is around 1,700 acres a year in Florida, said Kathleen Merrigan, deputy secretary at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

"This is huge," Merrigan said. "It is extremely significant in what we do. ... It's a big piece of our national effort."

The four ranching families and companies that own the properties have powerful political and economic ties.

They are Westby Corp., which is controlled by the Finn Caspersen family of Venice, Fla.; the Doyle Carlton family, which has produced a Florida governor and state senator; the Blue Head Ranch, which is controlled by the family of state senator J.D. Alexander, whose grandfather was Ben Hill Griffin Jr., one of Florida's most famous land barons; and the H.L. Clark family.

The landowners will still be able to graze cattle on the land, although they now will need certain permits from the government.

The Fisheating Creek watershed was a top priority for protection and restoration because it drains into Lake Okeechobee, which then continues to flow into the southern part of the Everglades. The new acquisition will form a conservation corridor stretching from central Florida down to Everglades National Park in South Florida and improve water quality in Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, Merrigan said.

"You can't repair the lower Everglades without repairing the northern Everglades," said U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Fla.

There also are 19 different species that will benefit from the acquisition, including the Florida panther and the bald eagle, Merrigan said.

The entire Everglades once covered more than 6,250 square miles, but that figure has shrunk by half. The land has been replaced with homes, farms and a 2,000-mile grid of drainage canals.

In South Florida, water managers have developed a plan supported by Gov. Charlie Crist to pay \$536 million for 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land in an effort to restore that part of the Everglades. Critics call it a waste of taxpayer money that will only slow other key restoration efforts. A challenge to the plan is pending before the Florida Supreme Court.

US to spend \$89 million on Everglades protection

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Forbes

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Associated Press

US to spend \$89 million on Everglades protection

By MIKE SCHNEIDER , 07.20.10, 08:09 AM EDT

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Senator's family key in \$89M deal to protect Everglades tributary

07/20/2010

Orlando Sentinel

Spear, Kevin

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Among the property owners taking part in a groundbreaking, \$89 million sale of development rights to further restoration of the Everglades is the huge and, in political circles, well-known Blue Head Ranch.

The 68,000-acre ranch, along Fisheating Creek in rural Highlands County, is owned by a corporation run by state Sen. J.D. Alexander, R- Lake Wales, chairman of the Legislature's powerful Ways and Means Committee.

On Monday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture formally unveiled its ambitious bid to buy easements on part of Blue Head Ranch and four adjoining ranches. The deal takes in a combined 26,000 acres, making it one of the largest such acquisitions yet by the federal agency. It also struck some as a new and better way to pursue restoration in the upper reaches of the Everglades ecosystem between Orlando and Lake Okeechobee.

"The reality is we can get some of the value out of the property today but also keep the property in perpetuity for other generations of the families and keep it in agriculture," said Ken Smith, a former Blue Head Ranch manager who helped with the negotiations.

USDA officials said that, although a lot of landowners expressed interest in selling development rights, the program's budget was able to accommodate only the five properties.

Smith said Blue Head Ranch is owned by three branches of a family that includes Alexander, who has avoided taking any active part in the sale to avoid criticism that he used his Senate position to influence the deal.

The families "have been talking about this for two or three years, and we finally got everybody together," Smith said. Alexander did not return calls Monday for comment.

Property rights for the 26,000 acres, which span a remote area of Highlands County 100 miles south of Orlando and 90 miles northwest of Fort Lauderdale, are being purchased through the USDA's Wetlands Reserve Program.

The scope of the deal and many of its details remained sketchy Monday because not all of the contracts have been signed, so some participants and financial terms were still protected by federal privacy rules, a USDA spokesman said.

Smith said the participating ranch owners also agreed among themselves not to disclose each ranch's share of the deal's acreage and money until all contracts are signed.

Fisheating Creek is Okeechobee's second-largest tributary, after the Kissimmee River, and the only free-flowing river

emptying into the huge lake.

Federal officials described the deal as the result of a growing emphasis on protecting vast landscapes of wetlands, rivers and lakes, rather than isolated patches of watery environments. The greater Everglades ecosystem, which extends from Orlando to the tip of the Florida peninsula, was deemed by federal agricultural authorities to be important enough for what turned out to be one of the largest acquisitions yet made by the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wetland Reserve Program.

The deal does not buy the 26,000 acres outright; instead, it places key restrictions on the land forever.

"What the landowners are keeping are agricultural rights over most of the property, and their ability to graze cattle is actually permitted," said Keith Fountain, director of land acquisition for the Nature Conservancy in Florida. "What the NRCS is doing is stripping the development rights off the property and getting the right to hydrological restoration."

Federal appraisals determined that \$89 million constitutes about 73 percent of the property's total worth had it been sold outright, according to a USDA official.

The purchase of property rights along the upper reaches of Fisheating Creek coincides with the federal government's ongoing restoration of the Kissimmee River at a cost so far of nearly \$1 billion. Also pending is a purchase by the South Florida Water Management District of 73,000 acres of sugar-cane farmland south of Lake Okeechobee for \$536 million.

Charles Lee, director of advocacy for Audubon of Florida, said the Fisheating Creek deal, while important in its own right, may also lead to a major shift in strategy for those seeking to restore the northern Everglades ecosystem.

Instead of trying to build huge and costly reservoirs to store and treat water, government officials should instead aim to repeat more deals like the one along Fisheating Creek, where restored wetlands can store and cleanse significant amounts of water less expensively, Lee said.

"Clearly there is work that must be done to capture water and remove nutrient [pollution] from waters all the way to the Orange County line," Lee said "The only way to do this is to figure out how to turn landowners into water farmers."

Except for extensive restoration along the Kissimmee River, the federal government has been perceived as slow to pay for land acquisition and major projects in ongoing efforts to restore the Everglades.

Even though negotiations for the Fisheating Creek deal took nearly a year, its announcement caught several environmentalists by surprise. Among them was Ellen Peterson, whose Palmdale-based Save Our Creeks group has been a longtime champion of Fisheating Creek.

"We had no idea, not a glimmer," said Peterson, who is eager to examine the agreement and learn just how much it protects Fisheating Creek.

Kevin Powers, a member of the South Florida Water Management District board, said that, surprising or not, the Fisheating Creek land acquisition is good news.

"We'll certainly take it anytime we can get it, and we're glad to have it," he said.

Kevin Spear can be reached at kspear@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5062.

SFWMD will not raise taxes...for now

07/17/2010

WZVN-TV

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WEST PALM: In the shadow of a \$536 million land deal in the Everglades, South Florida water managers will not be raising taxes.

The South Florida Water Management District Board voted on Thursday to keep next year's tax rate the same as it has been since 1998.

Conservative Tea Party activists flooded the board's Wednesday workshop, protesting a land purchase deal and any tax rate increases.

Party members disagree with a deal signed by Governor Charlie Crist to buy land from U.S. Sugar, claiming the purchase is for prices set in 2006, and not reflected in a 2010 market.

Activists feel strongly that the deal will raise taxes in order to cover what many believe is an overpriced acquisition.

The land deal has been appealed and remains in the Florida Supreme Court.

Blog: Rooney steps down from water district before big land deal decision

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07/17/2010

Sun Sentinel - Deerfield Beach Bureau

Reid, Andy

State House candidate Patrick Rooney Jr. has resigned his seat on the South Florida Water Management District board – avoiding a potentially controversial decision on a proposed \$536 million Everglades restoration land deal.

Rooney since 2007 represented Palm Beach County on the district's nine-member volunteer board, appointed by the governor.

For two years, the South Florida Water Management District has been pursuing Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed deal to buy land from U.S. Sugar that would be used to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

What started as a \$1.75 billion deal for 180,000 acres has been watered down due to the struggling economy to a still costly \$536 million deal for 73,000 acres.

The district's latest contract with U.S. Sugar expires in September – the same month the district board has to approve its budget while still awaiting a ruling from the Florida Supreme Court about whether the agency can borrow money to pay for the U.S. Sugar deal.

That leaves the district board facing a tough financial decision about whether it can afford to move forward with the land deal – hailed by environmental groups – at a time when property tax revenues continue to decline.

Now, Rooney won't have to weigh in on that decision.

"As you know, I've entered the race for State House District 83," Rooney, a Republican from West Palm Beach, wrote in his June 18 resignation letter to Crist. "I feel it is now necessary to focus my full concentration on the race."

The makeup of the board has been a big factor in keeping Crist's proposed land deal on the table. A vote to keep the deal alive passed by just one vote in December 2008, while board members in March unanimously passed an extension to the revised contract.

Rooney flip-flopped on his support for the deal: voting against a more expensive version in December 2008, but then voting in support of the 73,000-acre version in 2009 and 2010.

This week, Tea Party activists took aim at the pending U.S. Sugar land deal, with more than 80 group members protesting at the district board meeting against a deal they dubbed a bailout for U.S. Sugar.

Crist appointed Rooney to the district board in 2007. Rooney, president of the Palm Beach Kennel Club and two restaurant's that carry his family name, is running for the state house seat being vacated by state Rep. Carl Domino. The district includes northern and eastern Palm Beach County.

Rooney in his resignation letter to Crist called his time on the district board "a life changing opportunity."

Water managers hold tax rate level, swallowing \$61 million shortfall

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07/16/2010

Palm Beach Post

Sorentrue, Jennifer

South Florida water managers agreed Thursday to keep property tax rates flat next year -- a move that will require them to cut jobs and find efficiencies to cure a \$60.9 million decrease in revenue.

The South Florida Water Management District governing board unanimously agreed to hold the district's four separate property tax rates at this year's level. Palm Beach County residents pay three of those four taxes.

The move came a day after about 100 Tea Party activists rallied outside the district's headquarters to protest the planned \$500 million purchase of land owned by U.S. Sugar. The purchase is part of a plan, which Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled in 2009, to increase the flow of surface water through Florida's Everglades.

The activists said the district could give residents living in the 16 counties inside its jurisdiction a tax break if it doesn't move forward with the purchase. Many pled their case to the governing board at a workshop meeting Wednesday afternoon.

To help close the budget shortfall, the district has eliminated 132 contract workers, a savings of about \$9.1 million. The district will save an additional \$10 million by improving energy efficiencies in its buildings and using hybrid vehicles, spokesman Randy Smith said. Additional cuts will be made throughout the district to make up the rest of the gap, he said.

Under the \$1.04 billion budget proposal, which would be finalized in September, the district's main property tax would remain at 25 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable value. A second property tax used to control and manage water in the area around Lake Okeechobee would be set at this year's level of 28 cents. And a third tax, used to pay for Everglades restoration, will be held at 9 cents.

At those rates, the owner of a \$150,000 home in Palm Beach County, with a \$50,000 homestead exemption would pay \$62.40 to the district next year.

Cara Capp, with Clean Water Action and one of only two people to speak about the spending plan Thursday, said the U.S. Sugar purchase was a critical to supplying South Florida with clean drinking water.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity," she said. "Our economy relies on the availability of clean water. There is no single better investment this government can make than in restoration."

The district will hold two public hearings on the spending plan, on September 8 and 21.

Jennifer_Sorentrue@pbpost.com

South Florida water managers avoid tax increase as they push for Everglades land deal

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07/16/2010

Sun Sentinel

Reid, Andy

Pledging no new taxes, South Florida water managers on Thursday agreed to keep the water district property tax rate unchanged for the coming budget year as they pursue a \$536 million Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

A budget squeeze blamed on Florida's lingering economic downturn has jeopardized the proposed 73,000-acre purchase pushed by Gov. Charlie Crist as a way to fill in the "missing link" in Everglades restoration.

The South Florida Water Management District — which leads Everglades restoration — has long maintained it wouldn't increase the property tax rate to purchase the land. On Thursday, the board agreed to keep the tax rate where it's been since 1998, for the budget year that begins in October.

The rate is 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 for residents of Broward and Palm Beach counties would be about \$112 a year. Final approval of the tax rate comes in September.

District Board Chairman Eric Buermann has blamed "corporate opponents" of U.S. Sugar — referring to Florida Crystals — for claiming that the land deal will require tax increases.

"Nobody has ever seriously contemplated or discussed raising taxes," Buermann said Wednesday. "We all understand about paying taxes and spending taxpayers' money."

The continued drop in property values, due to the struggling economy, is projected to leave the district with about \$61 million less in property tax revenues for the new budget year.

This comes as the district tries to pull off the still-pending deal with U.S. Sugar, while paying for its ongoing flood control and water supply duties.

The plan is to use U.S. Sugar land for reservoirs and treatment areas that could restore water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. In addition to acquiring 73,000 acres, the deal includes a 10-year option to buy another 107,000 acres from U.S. Sugar.

The proposed deal allows U.S. Sugar to lease back much of the land, for \$150 an acre annually, for as long as 20 years while the water management district phases in restoration construction.

During the two years since the deal was announced, the district's tax revenues and state funding dropped by nearly \$300 million.

Environmental groups and other supporters call the blockbuster deal a historic opportunity to acquire former Everglades land drained through the decades to make way for agriculture. They envision capturing more of the stormwater now drained out to sea to avoid flooding and using it to replenish the Everglades and drinking water supplies.

"Our state water supply and the Everglades are priceless," said Cara Capp of Clean Water Action, who Thursday called on the district board to approve the U.S. Sugar land deal. "Protecting this vital resource should be our foremost priority."

Opponents of the deal, led by U.S. Sugar rival Florida Crystals and Miccosukee Tribe, contend that it costs too much and could drain funding from other overdue Everglades restoration projects.

Tea Party activists have dubbed the deal a bailout for U.S. Sugar, and on Wednesday more than 80 group members protested the deal at the South Florida Water Management District headquarters west of West Palm Beach.

"Even if they don't raise the [tax] rate, they are going to have to [borrow money]," said Marianne Moran, who helped organize Wednesday's Tea Party protest. "We don't need the land."

The U.S. Sugar land deal, two years in the making, already has been scaled back from the original \$1.75 billion, 180,000-acre buyout first proposed by the governor. It could be headed for another downsizing or restructuring to allow it to move ahead.

A still-pending legal challenge now before the Florida Supreme Court could limit the district's plan to borrow money to pay for the deal.

If the Supreme Court or the drop in tax revenues limits the district's ability to borrow the money for the deal, the district could try to cover more of the cost with cash or reduce the amount of land it bus.

Cutting the deal down to 25,000 acres is one possibility.

The district's proposed \$1 billion budget plan includes \$321 million that could be used for buying U.S. Sugar property or for capital projects to address water-quality concerns.

Along with a continued decline in revenues, the district could be facing new costs to improve water quality.

Two federal judges this spring issued critical rulings about Florida's efforts address Everglades restoration and to meet water-quality requirements, intended to lessen pollution.

Even if the district gets the Supreme Court OK to borrow the money, it still can scrap the deal if the board decides it creates too much financial strain.

"The deal is going to be a challenge," Buermann said. "We don't know where we are going to go from here

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