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Bridging trail key to restoring Everglades

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07/30/2010

Sun Sentinel

John Adornato III

Everglades National Park, the largest tract of wilderness east of the Rocky Mountains, is home to more subtropical land and water than anywhere else in the United States. The Everglades is a place where the panther can roam and the wading bird can nest, and it is in need of restoration.

After 20 years of planning and debate, the federal government is building a project to elevate one mile of the Tamiami Trail to help restore historic freshwater flows back to Everglades National Park. That is the first step towards fully restoring the Everglades, but much more must be done to bring fresh water back to South Florida.

Extending from Tampa to Miami, Tamiami Trail crosses the width of the Florida peninsula through the center of the Everglades, and has acted as an unnatural barrier for water flow over the last 80 years. This barrier has left areas north of the road inundated with water, tree islands flooded and wildlife stranded, while southern areas of Everglades National Park and Florida Bay are lying parched, thirsting for fresh water.

The recent release of the National Park Service's plan endorses 5.5 miles of additional bridging along Tamiami Trail and builds upon the one-mile bridge project. Moving this project forward is key to reversing the current ecological decline, and ensuring that we protect this nationally significant treasure for our children and grandchildren.

The draft plan comes at an opportune time as Congress has instructed the Department of Interior to examine other alternatives for more bridging as they work on the one-mile project that began in December 2009. In addition, Florida is in negotiations to acquire land in the Everglades Agriculture Areas from U.S. Sugar. Acquiring this land would help store and treat water and vastly improve water quality and the volume of water flowing south to Everglades National Park, benefiting estuaries in the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers. Both projects will reestablish the historic water flows back to Florida Bay.

In addition to the one-mile project, more bridging will provide indisputable environmental benefits to the Everglades and Florida Bay, as well as provide great economic benefits for the region. Not only does the plan serve as a landmark restoration project for the nation, but it will also put people back to work in South Florida. The construction for both projects will employ thousands of South Florida residents throughout the region, and also bring sport fishermen back to Florida Bay.

We applaud the Park Service for their visionary plan to bridge more of Tamiami Trail. After years of delay, lawsuits and inadequate funding, we now have an opportunity to refocus our commitment to restoring the Everglades.

John Adornato III is the Sun Coast regional director of the National Parks Conservation Association.

EDITORIAL: New Everglades restoration deal helps Lake Okeechobee

07/25/2010

Sun Sentinel

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It's another ambitious land purchase that promises to aid the massive restoration of the Florida Everglades. This one, though, seems simpler and more doable.

Unlike the state's ongoing efforts to purchase 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar property south of Lake Okeechobee, the purchase proposed by the federal government appears to pass muster as a more straight-forward deal. It should be pursued to improve both Florida's natural habitat and the water quality flowing into Lake Okeechobee.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture last week announced the \$89 million purchase of the development rights to 26,000 acres in Highlands County, north of the lake. The deal was heralded as "groundbreaking," a familiar refrain used two years ago when Gov. Charlie Crist announced the purchase of 180,000 acres south of the lake to establish reservoirs and to treat marshes.

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Another similarity: The USDA's bid also puts taxpayer dollars in the pocket of another well-connected seller. However, the fact that one of the Central Florida ranches in this latest proposal is owned by a corporation run by state Sen. J.D. Alexander, the influential chair of that body's Ways and Means Committee, shouldn't deter the deal. Three branches of Alexander's family own the Blue Head Ranch, and to the senator's credit, he has avoided taking an active role in the sale of the property.

The arrangement imposes key development restrictions and preserves the natural habitat surrounding Fisheating Creek, the only free-flowing river emptying into Lake Okeechobee. The deal also has the potential to make inroads into a serious pollution problem that has long plagued Lake Okeechobee.

For years, the lake has been a dumping ground for pollutants from Central Florida farms and ranches, particularly phosphorous materials. Fortunately, the Florida Legislature is addressing run-off contamination from agricultural entities in Glades, Highlands, Osceola and Okeechobee counties by committing \$100 million in projects to store and treat water flowing into the lake. That effort coincides with the federal government's ongoing efforts to restore the natural flow of the Kissimmee River Basin, which water managers say will curb pollution into the lake.

Overall, there's been progress, and this initiative is another hopeful sign that water flowing into the largest lake in the southeast United States will be a bit cleaner.

BOTTOM LINE: A good deal for Lake Okeechobee.

EDITORIAL: Sugar deal outrage: Pale tea: Empty talking points financed by secret donors.

07/24/2010

Palm Beach Post

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It has become politically popular to slam the purchase of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration. The deal, as we've pointed out often, is not perfect. But the new opponents are wrong to portray the deal as a waste of public money.

Buying land south of Lake Okeechobee is critical to saving the Everglades. It's easy to lose sight of that fact in the fog of arguments over spending and sweetheart deals and anger caused by Gov. Crist's abandonment of the Republican Party. Yes, Gov. Crist initiated the deal. Yes, his former chief of staff worked for U.S. Sugar's law firm and helped negotiate the deal. Yes, the governor's negotiators drove a poor bargain initially, and made it only marginally better as the deal shrunk by more than half.

But is the deal to spend \$536 million for 73,000 acres bad for Florida? No. It might be a bad deal for Florida Crystals, the rival sugar company that fears giving up land for Everglades restoration if the deal goes through and has sued to block it. It's bad for Republicans who don't want Gov. Crist to campaign for the Senate as a champion of the environment.

Jumping into this political fight and mimicking the arguments of Florida Crystals is the not-for-profit Tea Party in Action, out of Boynton Beach. The group has produced a 30-second spot attacking Gov. Crist and the deal. Under Florida law, the group doesn't have to identify its donors. In an interview, Tea Party in Action Chairman Jim Moran refused to do so. So much for the tea party hating politics as usual.

But someone paid to bus about 100 protesters to a recent South Florida Water Management District board meeting and feed them lunch. Many were ignorant, calling the district a water and sewer board and saying the deal is about drainage, not water storage. Who paid? Maybe Marco Rubio, Gov. Crist's opponent and a tea party sweetheart. Maybe the Fanjuls, owners of Florida Crystals.

For nearly 100 years, Florida drained land for cities, suburbs and farms. Pumping water to tide for flood control has parched the Everglades. The \$10 billion state-federal plan to saturate the Everglades during dry times relied on storing water in huge underground silos, an approach that tests show will not work. So the state must buy land south of Lake Okeechobee to store and cleanse water for release when the Everglades gets too dry.

That approach costs money and, short of costly eminent domain litigation, requires a willing seller. Failing to buy the land would mean giving up on the Everglades. That would mean reducing the amount of water available to cities and suburbs, which would mean higher water bills. It would mean continuing to pollute the St. Lucie River with discharges from Lake Okeechobee. "Out-of-control spending" and "Charlie's bailout" are empty, paid-for talking points that the public should not take seriously.

