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|  | Florida Weighs Using Cash for Scaled Back Everglades Restoration, Land | 08/05/2010 Bloomberg | Simone Baribeau |

Scaled-down Everglades plan would secure 27K acres

08/05/2010

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Bradenton Herald

A historic effort to restore the dying Florida Everglades was scaled back yet again Wednesday, meaning the amount of land that will be purchased for protection is now about one-ninth the size originally planned.

The modified contract between the state and U.S. Sugar Corp. made public calls for an initial land purchase of 26,791 acres for about \$197.4 million, a fraction of the deal announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008.

The state had planned to pay \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres. Under the revised deal, it would still maintain the option to purchase the remainder of the plan.

"The intent on both sides is still to complete the total 180,000 acres of land," said Judy Sanchez, a spokeswoman for U. S. Sugar. "You have to take the first step. You can't get to the end game without several steps along the way."

Though severely scaled back, the deal still garnered praise from some environmentalists.

"I like this deal because it's doable," said Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon of Florida. "It's more important that we do something now than spending another year arguing about how big and how much."

The South Florida Water Management District is scheduled to vote on the new contract Aug. 12. It would then need to be approved by U.S. Sugar's board.

The Everglades have been dying for decades from the intrusion of farms and development, dissected by dikes, dams and canals, effectively draining much of the swamp and polluting it with fertilizers and urban runoff. The state and federal governments' efforts to restore the wetlands have been stymied for years by funding shortfalls, legal challenges and political bickering.

Read more: <http://www.bradenton.com/2010/08/04/2483450/reduced-everglades-plan-would.html#ixzz0vjMywLj4>

Scaled-down Everglades plan would secure 27,000 acres

08/05/2010

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Tampa Tribune

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Project to Restore Everglades Shrinks

08/05/2010

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Ledger, The

A historic plan to restore the dying Florida Everglades is getting even smaller.

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It's a far cry from the initial plan announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008: \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres. But the state maintains the right under the contract to purchase the remainder of that land.

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Everglades sugar land deal trimmed again: Will help but not cure St. Lucie Estuary, not burden taxpayers

08/05/2010

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TCPalm.com

Gov. Charlie Crist's stalled Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. would be watered down again under a proposal released Wednesday to buy less sugar cane land for environmental restoration.

The new deal — which would reduce but not eliminate dumping of polluted fresh water into the St. Lucie Estuary — calls for the South Florida Water Management District to buy 26,800 acres for \$197 million. That is down from the previous plan to buy 73,000 acres for \$536 million.

This is the third time that the district, which leads Everglades restoration, proposed downsizing the land deal with U.S. Sugar due to declining tax revenues amid the struggling economy.

The deal would not place additional pressure on the region's taxpayers and still provide large chunks of land to aid efforts to store and treat stormwater to replenish the Everglades.

But it would be just a fraction of the 180,000-acre, \$1.75 billion deal with U.S. Sugar that Crist and district officials first proposed in June 2008.

Treasure Coast environmentalists who have lauded the U.S. Sugar purchase plan as a way to create a flow-way taking water south from Lake Okeechobee rather than dumping it into the St. Lucie Estuary, said they were pleased the project is gaining traction but disappointed that enough land to stop the discharges can't be bought.

"While we're supportive of any land acquisition that's going to hold Lake Okeechobee water and supports the concept of the flow way south from the lake to the Everglades, it's extremely disappointing that the vision of reviving the River of Grass has been whittled down like this," said Leon Adood of Stuart, chairman of the Rivers Coalition, a consortium of Treasure Coast environmentalists, businesses, homeowner associations and civic groups fighting the Lake O discharges. "This is a far cry from solving the problem, but diverting any water will help. We've got to take what we can get."

Mark Perry, executive director of the Stuart-based Florida Oceanographic Society, called the revised plan "better than nothing."

"From what I've heard, it's the best deal we can expect right now," Perry said. "I'm disappointed that we can't get the original 180,000 acres that was suggested or even the amended 73,000 acres; but any acreage we can get in the (Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee) takes that land out of sugar productions, reduces phosphorus pollution and gives us more land for water storage. This won't solve the estuary's problems, but it's a good first step. Taking steps two, three, four and five will be up to the (economic) conditions at the time. "

The new U.S. Sugar land deal goes before the district's appointed board on Aug. 12.

"It has been a saga that will hopefully come to a conclusion, for better or for worse," District Board Chairman Eric Buermann said. "I think we are getting there."

Other area environmental groups on Wednesday said the scaled-down deal was still worth the chance to get more land to help restore water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

"We are obviously disappointed in the amount of land, but we are pleased it is moving forward," said Thom Rumberger, of the Everglades Trust.

Charles Lee, advocacy director for Florida Audubon, acknowledged the change was a "significant downsizing of the deal" but said it retained "the absolutely most essential land for water quality."

"This is the land that gets you the most the quickest in dealing with the water-quality issue," he said.

Sugar producer and U.S. Sugar rival, Florida Crystals, along with the Miccosukee Tribe, are still waging a legal fight to try to derail the land deal.

They have argued that the land buy costs taxpayers too much and takes money away from other Everglades restoration projects.

Even with a scaled-down version, the district still lacks a concrete plan for how the U.S. Sugar land would be used and how that affects other restoration efforts, Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens said.

"Over two years of working on this and this is the best they can come up with?" Cantens asked, reacting to the proposal released Wednesday. "It doesn't solve any problems."

Barbara Miedema, vice president of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, questioned how the new push to purchase two "far-flung" properties from U.S. Sugar fit into the governor's original plan to buy up land to recreate the "missing link" where water once flowed south from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

"Where is the benefit now to the Everglades?" Miedema asked.

Reducing the price of the deal allows the district to use a reserve planned for land buying and other restoration efforts to complete the 26,800-acre transaction.

The previous deal called for borrowing the \$536 million and relying on South Florida property tax revenue to pay off the long-term debt.

The deal now calls for the district to buy more citrus land than sugar cane fields from U.S. Sugar. It includes 17,900 acres of citrus land in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of sugar cane land in Palm Beach County.

The deal would still give the district a 10-year option to buy U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,200 acres.

As before, U.S. Sugar could also lease back much of the land it would sell to the district for as long as 20 years as the district phases in restoration efforts.

The new plan calls for closing on the transaction in October.

The deal could still be affected by a pending ruling from the Florida Supreme Court over the legal challenge filed by Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee.

If the district board approves the new terms of the deal, it would then go to U.S. Sugar's board for approval. The water management district's board is appointed by Crist.

U.S. Sugar considers the latest proposal just a "modification" that would one day allow the district to buy the company's remaining land, spokeswoman Judy Sanchez said.

"Obviously \$536 million is beyond the district's ability to purchase," Sanchez said. "We're still committed to completing the purchase."

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers staff writer Tyler Treadway and David Fleshler of the Sun Sentinel contributed to this report. Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or (561) 228-5504.

Reduced Everglades plan would secure 27,000 acres

08/05/2010

Naples Daily News

MIAMI — A historic plan to restore the dying Florida Everglades is getting even smaller.

A modified contract between the state and U.S. Sugar Corp. was posted Wednesday. It calls for the initial purchase of 26,791 acres for about \$197.4 million.

It's a far cry from the initial plan announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008: \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres. But the state maintains the right under the contract to purchase the remainder of that land.

The South Florida Water Management District will vote on the new contract Aug. 12.

Critics have called the deal a waste of taxpayer money that will only slow other key restoration efforts.

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SFWMD again amends size and price of land purchase with U.S.

Sugar

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08/05/2010

Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers

Killer, Ed

WEST PALM BEACH — The South Florida Water Management District announced Wednesday it will address a modified plan to purchase land critical for restoration of the Everglades from U.S. Sugar Corp. during the District's Aug. 12 Governing Board meeting at District offices in West Palm Beach. The new proposal will buy less acreage up front, deferring cost and purchase of future acreage to a 10-year option plan.

The new purchase arrangement would transfer 26,800 acres of land - 17,900 acres of land in citrus production in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of land in sugar production in Palm Beach County - into state ownership with an agreement to lease the sugar land back to U.S. Sugar until restoration efforts can begin. The initial purchase price would be \$197,396,088 negotiated at \$7,400 per acre. There will be options for the District to purchase an additional 153,200 acres over the next 10 years.

The modified agreement saves state taxpayers \$340 million from the May 2009 negotiated price of \$536 million to purchase 73,000 acres. The original plan to have the State of Florida buy out land from U.S. Sugar took environmental, government and business leaders by surprise when it was announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in June 2008. In December 2008, the District accepted a proposal to acquire more than 180,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar pending financing.

Upon Governing Board approval, the new deal would close in 60 days.

To view the map of the lands proposed for acquisition visit: [Map of lands to be acquired](#)

For more details about the purchase agreement and all documents relating to this discussion and the U.S. Sugar acquisition, visit River of Grass documents where District staff will continue to post all documents related to the matter.

Southwest Florida Online - Sunday Morning News

08/05/2010

Southwest Florida Online

Browne, Don

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On August 12, 2010, the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board will consider an amended transaction for the acquisition of land from the United States Sugar Corporation for Everglades restoration. The amended acquisition, subject to Governing Board approval, is designed to address changing economic conditions while providing access to land for restoration and water quality improvement projects.

On December 16, 2008, the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District voted to accept a proposal to acquire more than 180,000 acres of agricultural land for Everglades restoration from the United States Sugar Corporation, pending financing.

In light of dramatic changes in economic conditions and predictions of a continued uncertain financial environment, the two parties in April 2009 agreed to revise the transaction and, on May 13, 2009, the Governing Board approved a purchase and sale and lease agreement that provided for an initial \$536 million acquisition of close to 73,000 acres, with options to purchase the remaining 107,000 acres during the next ten years.

http://my.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/portal/xrepository/sfwmd_repository_pdf/jtf_rog_0804_2010.pdf - Fact Sheet On Amended Agreement

Reduced Everglades plan would secure 27,000 acres

08/05/2010

WEAR-TV

MIAMI (AP) -- A historic plan to restore the dying Florida Everglades is getting even smaller.

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The South Florida Water Management District will vote on the new contract Aug. 12.

Critics have called the deal a waste of taxpayer money that will only slow other key restoration efforts.

U.S. Sugar purchase downsized, again

08/05/2010

South Florida Business Journal

For the fourth time, a plan to buy significant portions of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s property in the Everglades has been downsized.

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A victim of the recession and politics, the plan is now a tiny fraction of the larger vision announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008.

At that time, Crist proposed the South Florida Water Management District buy 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee for up to \$1.7 billion.

But the latest incarnation would start with 26,800 acres using \$197 million in cash with options to acquire approximately 153,200 acres over the next 10 years.

The water district said in a news release Wednesday that the new plan is necessary due to two factors: a decline of \$150 million in district revenues since 2008, and the need to address recent federal court orders related to Everglades restoration.

"This amended transaction would utilize available cash on-hand to immediately purchase strategic parcels of land with high restoration potential while preserving the option to acquire additional lands, if future economic conditions allow," the release said.

The breakdown of the latest plan includes the following land segments: 17,900 citrus acres located in Hendry County and 8,900 sugar cane acres located in Palm Beach County.

According to the water district, the purchase price of \$197 million has been negotiated at \$7,400 per acre. The latest downsizing would save the district more than \$340 million, compared to a May 2009 version of the plan to purchase 73,000 acres for \$536 million.

The new proposed cash transaction also eliminates the need for financing the downsized purchase with bonds or Certificates of Participation, which avoids court battles over certification and also avoids financing costs. Previously, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians and Florida Crystals Corp. had objected to bonding for the project.

A leaseback option for U.S. Sugar is still part of the new plan. The company would lease the 8,900 acres of sugar cane lands from the district at \$150 per acre only until such time that the water district needs the land for restoration projects or land exchange; the district may utilize the citrus lands with 12 months notice. According to the water district, the lease arrangement for the initial acquisition lands would generate \$1 million in annual revenue.

The water district's governing board will consider the modified transaction at its meeting on Aug. 12. Upon approval, the two parties would close the initial land acquisition within 60 days.

Read more: U.S. Sugar purchase downsized, again - South Florida Business Journal

MIAMI - Crist's Big Sugar Deal Downsized Again

08/05/2010

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PODER Enterprise

More than two years ago, Gov. Crist proposed to buy out the U.S. Sugar Corp. and its 180,000 acres of sugar farms for \$1.75 billion in order to restore the Everglades. But the recession and a slew of legal setbacks have shrunk that plan for a third time, The Miami Herald reported. The deal being contemplated by the South Florida Water Management District, which would bankroll the land buy, now stands at \$197 million for 26,800 acres. It had previously been downsized to \$536 million for 72,800 acres, with options to purchase an additional 100,000 acres. One of the main reasons for the decline in the scope of the project is that the water district's budget, which comes in large part from property taxes, has fallen by \$150 million since 2008.

Read more: http://www.poder360.com/dailynews_detail.php?blurbid=8438#ixzz0vj97dYIO

Everglades restoration buy of U.S. Sugar land may be sharply downsized

08/05/2010

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Palm Beach Post

Adam Playford

The South Florida Water Management District is considering cutting the once-mammoth U.S. Sugar Deal - which started at 180,000 acres and had already dropped to 73,000 amid concerns about cost - to one-seventh of what Gov. Charlie Crist announced to much fanfare in 2008.

The district would buy 26,800 acres and retain a 10-year option to buy the rest of the land, said Eric Buermann, the chairman of the district's governing board. The governing board will vote on the proposal next week, as will U.S. Sugar Corp.'s board of directors.

The original deal became "in essence unsustainable," Buermann said, as the worsening economy sapped the district's tax base and left it unable to find the huge loans it was counting on.

The newest plan calls for a \$197 million purchase.

Crist's original proposal, announced in 2008, was to buy all of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s assets for \$1.75 billion, and use it to replenish the Everglades, letting water from Lake Okechobee run its natural route. Environmentalists hailed the proposal as historic and the largest land conservation deal ever.

But within a year, the plan was cut to \$536 million, as the water district ran into intense concerns about how it would pay for the measure.

The latest agreement, announced Wednesday, is another step back from that. It calls for the water management district buy a few key areas now - mostly adjacent to land the state already owns - that would let it dedicate new land to water purification. The district was recently slammed for persistently high phosphorus levels in Everglades water by a federal judge.

The smaller amount of money can be found without borrowing, Buermann said. "We've identified the cash."

"With the recent court rulings, I think we see that writing on the wall, that the state is going to have to acquire land ... in order to meet what the federal government and the federal courts are putting upon us. ... Unless somebody in the interim invents the magic pill that makes phosphorus disappear, I don't see any other way of achieving that," he said.

Environmental groups praised the new deal Wednesday.

Improving water quality is Audubon of Florida's top priority for the Everglades, said Charles Lee, the group's director of advocacy.

"Out of all the possible lands that they could have targeted, they got the best ones," he said, adding that this is "the most crucially important land for Everglades water quality."

Joanne Davis, a community planner with 1000 Friends of Florida, echoed that sentiment, saying that what matters is that the deal move forward, "even if it's baby steps."

"I wish we could've done it all at once and in one fell swoop, own the land and then begin planning," she said. "But that's not the economic reality. Everything is tight. ... It's such a huge project that we just need to get some momentum and keep on moving."

This will let the district do exactly that, said U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez. "They're buying what they can so they can start moving forward," she said.

But Gaston Cantens, a spokesman for U.S. Sugar rival Florida Crystals, which has strongly opposed the deal, said the purchase would do "absolutely nothing" for the Everglades. He said the district should instead focus on finishing projects it has started.

"Why do you need to buy more land now?" he asked. "You need to build more projects, before the Everglades is destroyed. It is mindboggling to me."

Staff researcher Niels Heimeriks contributed to this story.

Downsizing planned for Crist's Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar

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08/05/2010

Sun Sentinel - Deerfield Beach Bureau

Reid, Andy

Gov. Charlie Crist's stalled Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. would be watered down again under a proposal released Wednesday to buy less sugar cane land for environmental restoration.

The new deal calls for the South Florida Water Management District to buy 26,800 acres for \$197 million. That is down from the previous plan to buy 73,000 acres for \$536 million.

This is the third time that the district — which leads Everglades restoration — proposed downsizing the land deal with U.S. Sugar due to declining tax revenues amid the struggling economy.

The deal would still provide large chunks of land to aid efforts to store and treat stormwater to replenish the Everglades.

But it would be just a fraction of the 180,000-acre, \$1.75 billion deal with U.S. Sugar that Crist and district officials first proposed in June 2008.

The new U.S. Sugar land deal goes before the district's appointed board on Aug. 12.

"It has been a saga that will hopefully come to a conclusion, for better or for worse," District Board Chairman Eric Buermann said. "I think we are getting there."

Environmental groups on Wednesday said the scaled-down deal was still worth the chance to get more land to help restore water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

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Sugar producer and U.S. Sugar rival, Florida Crystals, along with the Miccosukee Tribe, are still waging a legal fight to try to derail the land deal.

They have argued that the land buy costs taxpayers too much and takes money away from other Everglades restoration projects.

Even with a scaled-down version, the district still lacks a concrete plan for how the U.S. Sugar land would be used and how that affects other restoration efforts, Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens said.

"Over two years of working on this and this is the best they can come up with?" Cantens asked, reacting to the proposal released Wednesday. "It doesn't solve any problems."

Cutbacks shrink deal for sugar land

08/05/2010

Miami Herald, The

Morgan, Curtis

An ambitious plan to buy \$1.75 billion of land from the U.S. Sugar Corp. for environmental cleanup projects has been reduced to a fraction of the goal.

BY CURTIS MORGAN

cmorgan@MiamiHerald.com

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For the third and likely last time, Gov. Charlie's Crist's controversial Big Sugar deal is being dramatically downsized.

With their budget squeezed by a brutal economy and two major legal defeats, South Florida water managers have proposed yet another major whack at a land buy once so bold and bright that environmentalists touted it as the holy grail of Everglades restoration: Buy out the entire U.S. Sugar Corp. -- lock, stock and all 180,000-plus acres -- for \$1.75 billion and convert much of the massive swath of farms into water storage and cleanup projects.

The fragments now left on the table: \$197 million cash for 26,800 acres, most of it citrus groves, and "options" to buy the rest at \$7,400 an acre over the next three years or at market price over the next decade.

Eric Buermann, the district's chairman, said Crist understood the fiscal landscape had undergone an upheaval since June 2008, when the governor publicly unveiled the proposal.

"He would like to have done the whole deal as it was originally conceived, as we all wanted to do, but he is obviously a realist," Buermann said. "If you don't have the money, you don't have the money."

Environmentalists said the whittled-down deal would still salvage what most experts agree the Everglades restoration needs most: more land to catch and clean water.

The parcels -- 17,900 acres of citrus groves in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of sugar fields in the massive Everglades farming area -- would help two "hot spots" for water pollution, said Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon of Florida.

'FINISH LINE'

Unlike earlier -- and far more expensive -- versions, Draper believes this one has a solid shot at survival.

"The deal was hard for a lot of legislators and other political movers to swallow and when the economy tanked, it made it a harder sale," he said. "Now, we've got something we can get across the finish line."

A governing board vote scheduled for Aug. 12 may be the last, best shot at preserving a small part of a big deal that Crist had envisioned as his environmental legacy. With Crist leaving the governor's mansion after the November elections, and not much more land left to downsize, odds are it will be this deal or nothing.

Though embraced by most environmental groups and praised in international news coverage, the initial deal to buy out and shut down the state's largest and oldest sugar company quickly ran into trouble.

First, the reeling economy forced a downsizing to a land-only deal within five months. Four months later, it was

chopped by two-thirds to \$536 million for 72,800 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields, with options on the remaining 107,500 more.

BACKLASH

There was backlash from rural communities who contended the deal would devastate already struggling economies. Two politically powerful foes -- rival grower Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe -- mounted a fierce legal and lobbying assault that painted the deal as a sweetheart bailout for a major Crist campaign donor. They argued the deal would stick the state with poorly located land it wouldn't be able to build anything on for decades and actually delay Everglades restoration.

The district's plans to bankroll the deal with bonds were pinched by state lawmakers, a Palm Beach County judge and a tight lending market. And, to top it off, two federal judges -- Alan Gold and Federico Moreno -- delivered a double-barreled legal blast in the spring, ripping the state for ``glacial delay" in cleaning up the Everglades.

Buermann said the deal was a great vision undermined by a ``triple witching hour" of bad timing.

It was no secret the district was balking at the previous \$536 million price tag.

The agency's annual budget, which depends largely on property taxes in a South Florida market with one of the nation's worst housing markets, had declined by \$150 million in two years.

In February, an outside financial advisor warned that mounting deficits -- then projected to hit \$110 million by 2012 -- could force ``very difficult decisions" and jeopardize restoration or core missions to control flooding and supply water.

A month later, an internal ``financial options" memo sketched out an array of potential and politically messy cuts to afford the deal: canceling or postponing nearly a dozen existing Everglades restoration projects, slashing salaries, selling a district plane, closing a laboratory, selling state-owned land or downsizing the deal.

The irony, said Buermann, is that the district needs more land now than ever because of the federal court rulings and demands from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for tougher nutrient pollution standards.

But with the board pledging not to raise tax rates to support the deal, Buermann said the best remaining choice was to buy two chunks of land now and hope that either the economy eventually rebounds or the federal government chips in to pick up the land options.

``I don't think it's a pipe dream," he said.

Judy Sanchez, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sugar, said rising sugar prices had helped pay down the privately held company's debt and left it in a stronger position than two years ago. Sanchez said the board still supports the deal and shares Crist's vision of leaving an environmental legacy.

EVERGLADES HELP

The two parcels wouldn't do much for Lake Okeechobee and its two rivers and fragile estuaries, she said, but would help portions of the Glades.

``Right now, any amount of storage and treatment is going to be better than what we have today," she said.

Read more: http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/08/04/1761962_p2/cutbacks-shrink-deal-for-sugar.html#ixzz0vj84GCMY

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/08/04/1761962/cutbacks-shrink-deal-for-sugar.html#ixzz0vj81NMHd>

Scaled-down Everglades plan would secure 27K acres

08/05/2010

Associated Press (AP)

MATT SEDENSKY

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The modified contract between the state and U.S. Sugar Corp. made public calls for an initial land purchase of 26,791 acres for about \$197.4 million, a fraction of the deal announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008.

The state had planned to pay \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres. Under the revised deal, it would still maintain the option to purchase the remainder of the plan.

"The intent on both sides is still to complete the total 180,000 acres of land," said Judy Sanchez, a spokeswoman for U. S. Sugar. "You have to take the first step. You can't get to the end game without several steps along the way."

Though severely scaled back, the deal still garnered praise from some environmentalists.

"I like this deal because it's doable," said Eric Draper, executive director of Audubon of Florida. "It's more important that we do something now than spending another year arguing about how big and how much."

The South Florida Water Management District is scheduled to vote on the new contract Aug. 12. It would then need to be approved by U.S. Sugar's board.

The Everglades have been dying for decades from the intrusion of farms and development, dissected by dikes, dams and canals, effectively draining much of the swamp and polluting it with fertilizers and urban runoff. The state and federal governments' efforts to restore the wetlands have been stymied for years by funding shortfalls, legal challenges and political bickering.

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2010/08/04/1761578/reduced-everglades-plan-would.html#ixzz0vj7qAPo9>

Florida Weighs Using Cash for Scaled Back Everglades Restoration, Land

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Simone Baribeau

Florida may scale back a plan to restore the Everglades marshland and pay cash to buy land from U.S. Sugar Corp. after a proposed \$536 million purchase using debt spurred legal challenges and tax revenue fell.

The revised plan, to buy 26,800 acres (10,846 hectares) for \$197.4 million in cash for restoration of the 100 mile-long (161 kilometer) wetland at the state's southern end, will be considered by the South Florida Water Management District on Aug. 12, according to documents on the group's website.

The reduced acquisition compares with an earlier plan to buy 180,000 acres from the closely held sugar producer, based in Clewiston, Florida. That proposal was approved last year by the district, which oversees efforts to reclaim farmland and restore water flow to 1.4 million acres of wetlands. The new arrangement carries a 10-year option to buy another 153,200 acres.

"To fight the bad economy and the decline in our tax revenues, we decided to purchase what acreage we could afford and leave the rest in the option," Eric Buermann, chairman of the district's governing board, said yesterday by telephone. "Our ability to do bond financing became really problematic with the economy."

When he announced the original purchase plan in June 2008, Governor Charlie Crist called it the "critical missing link" in restoring and protecting coastal estuaries in Florida. The proposal included buying about 300 square miles of land, 200 miles of railroad and manufacturing plants for \$1.75 billion.

Supporters, Foes React

"We're disappointed that there's not more land involved" in the latest plan, said Thom Rumberger, chairman of the Everglades Trust, an environmental-preservation group. Yet he applauded the proposal in a telephone interview yesterday. "This is certainly a step in the right direction and for that, we're very excited."

Opponents, including the Miccosukee Tribe and Florida Crystals Corp., a West Palm Beach-based U.S. Sugar competitor, sued to prevent the use of debt for the purchase. The tribe cited plans to lease some of the land back to U.S. Sugar, which it claimed would undermine the proposal's environmental goals and make the debt issue illegal.

About a third of the 26,800 acres, or the 8,900 acres used to grow sugar cane, would be leased back to U.S. Sugar for seven years or swapped or sold to another producer, Buermann said. The lease may generate \$1 million a year, district documents say.

The scaled-down cash proposal vindicates the opponents' claims, said Gaston Cantens, a Florida Crystals spokesman.

"All we've done is point out every step of the way that they couldn't afford it," Cantens said by telephone. "We were right. They couldn't afford it."

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