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Regional meetings on Everglades land buy could air out controversy: restoration or politics

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08/11/2010
Palm Beach Post
Stapleton, Christine

Regional meetings on Everglades land buy could air out controversy: restoration or politics

By Christine Stapleton Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Updated: 9:40 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2010

Posted: 7:58 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 10, 2010

The proposed purchase of 28,000 acres to help restore the Everglades is as much about appeasing a federal judge as it is about clean water.

The reasons and motives behind the controversial and speedy sale will be aired Wednesday and Thursday as the South Florida Water Management District holds public meetings about the \$197 million sale. Protestors, activists, attorneys, consultants, scientists, dealmakers and politicians are expected to appear.

"It's going to be interesting," said Eric Buermann, chairman of the district's governing board.

The proposal is a drastically scaled back version of the June 2008 monumental proposal to spend \$2 billion on 197,000 acres of land - about the size of New York City - for Everglades restoration from U.S. Sugar Corp.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who at the time was a potential running mate for John McCain, hailed the plan as the "missing link" that would re-create a path for water to flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

But in May 2009 the district scaled down the plan to 73,000 acres, citing the economy and declining tax revenue. The sale seemed stalled until Aug. 3, when the district announced it had whittled down the plan again - this time to 28,000 acres.

Besides the economy, the district cited another reason: A scathing 48-page ruling released in April in which a federal judge accused the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the district of deliberately ignoring and refusing to enforce laws limiting the amount of phosphorus discharged into the Everglades.

The judge set a Sept. 3 deadline for the EPA to recommend how the district should enforce phosphorus limits. The district must then explain to the judge how it will follow the EPA recommendations. Would the district be considering buying the land now if the judge's deadline was not looming?

"I don't know," district board member Shannon Estenoz said. Buermann said he was not happy with the timing of the proposal.

Also unknown is whether the sale will appease the judge. The district currently has "no money in the till" to build anything on the land. It has no timeline and only "conceptual" plans for what it intends to do with the land, Buermann said.

"Look, the writing is on the wall," said Buermann, who supports the deal. "We're at the mercy of the process. I think if you buy they land they will come. I think the feds are coming to the table and being supportive. I would hope this sends a real message to Washington."

One of the two parcels in the proposed sale is an 18,000-acre wedge south of Lake Okeechobee, currently used to grow citrus. The land, which lies beside one of the most polluted water treatment areas, is desperately needed to lower phosphorus levels in the water that chronically exceeds federal limits.

As for the 9,000-acre parcel on the east side of Lake Okeechobee, the district intends to swap it for land owned by Florida Crystals, the rival of U.S. Sugar. The district needs the land to improve water quality in another badly polluted treatment area. But Florida Crystals won't agree to a deal without assurance that the judge will consider it a solution.

"If this deal is what they're claiming it is - a potential end to all this litigation and we have certainty of that - we would be more than happy to work with them," said Gaston Cantens, spokesman for Florida Crystals.

Environmentalists still support the deal - a better-than-nothing remnant of the original plan - especially since the land is so close to the most polluted and troublesome water treatment areas.

"Obviously we remain disappointed in the amount of land the district is able to purchase," said attorney Thom Rumberger, chairman of the Islamorada-based Everglades Trust. "We are happy that we have at least two or three valuable piece of land."

The most vocal opponents will most likely be the Tea Party In Action, which has vowed to protest outside the district headquarters by broadcasting voicemail messages from "people all over Florida against the U.S. Sugar bailout," said Marianne Moran, executive director of the group. According to Moran, "the deal is a veiled attempt to "bail out" U.S. Sugar with tax-dollars in the name of saving the Everglades."

"The South Florida Water Management District was created to control flooding - it should not be in the business of restoring Everglades," Moran said. "That's the job of the environmentalists and conservationists."

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Miccosukees File Injunction to Block Everglades Land Purchase

08/12/2010

Sunshine State News

Ward, Kenric

Hours before the South Florida Water Management District was to consider a plan to purchase 26,800 acres of U.S. Sugar land, the Miccosukee Tribe went to U.S. District Court to block the deal.

The tribe filed a motion for a temporary injunction Tuesday to prevent the water district from violating the court's March 31 order to build the EAA A-1 Reservoir Project.

Citing comments from SFWMD Chairman Eric Buermann, the Miccosukees claim that the district will not be able to fund both the reservoir project and the proposed \$197 million land purchase.

As the governing board meets today and Thursday to consider the downsized land deal, Gaston Cantens, vice president of Florida Crystals, said signing a contract would be an "irresponsible (move) by an unelected board not accountable to anyone but themselves and the governor."

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Florida Officials To Vote on Land Purchase That Could Help Everglades

08/11/2010

National Parks Traveler Blog

Repanshek, Kurt

Florida Officials To Vote on Land Purchase That Could Help Everglades

A key vote is scheduled for Thursday that will go a long way towards determining the health of Everglades National Park. At 11 a.m. EDT the South Florida Water Management District is scheduled to vote on whether to purchase a portion of U.S. Sugar Corporation's land holdings in the Everglades.

The purchase, though not as enormous as first proposed -- now involving just 26,800 acres, vs. the initial 181,000 acres -- is still viewed by proponents as invaluable to the national park. It will, figuratively speaking, straighten a kink in the natural plumbing of the region. Developments such as the sugar plantation have disrupted natural water flows from the lake into the park. Without them, the so-called "River of Grass" can't survive.

According to the South Florida Wildlands Association, "(D)rained of its water and filled with pollution (the Everglades has lost 90 percent of its wading birds and no fish caught within it are considered truly safe to eat), the ecosystem today is on life support."

Indeed, last week Interior Secretary Ken Salazar was happy to hear that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization had returned the national park to its World Heritage Site In Danger list, citing "serious and continuing degradation of its aquatic ecosystem."

South Florida Wildlands along with other environmental organizations in south Florida believe this deal should go

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forward, the association said.

"Aside from allowing for 'filter marshes' capable of extracting huge quantities of runoff and other pollutants from Everglades water (which also happens to be the public water supply for most of south Florida), removing agricultural production is the best and possibly only hope for bringing the Everglades back from the brink," a release from the group said. "Part of the current purchase would also provide connectivity between Florida panther habitat in the southwest corner of Palm Beach County (in state Wildlife Management Areas well utilized by one of the most endangered species on the planet) and federal, state, and tribal lands (e.g. Big Cypress National Preserve, Big Cypress Seminole Reservation, and the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest) to the south and west."

If you can't attend the meeting, which is being held at the water district headquarters at 3301 Gun Club Road, West Palm Beach, Florida, you can email your opinion to the commissioners at the following addresses:

jmontgom@sfwmd.gov, sbatchel@sfwmd.gov, jcollins@sfwmd.gov, gwaldman@sfwmd.gov, kpowers@sfwmd.gov, cdauray@sfwmd.gov, sestenez@sfwmd.gov, ebuermann@sfwmd.gov

You can find details on the issue on this pdf.

Saving wetlands, farms and the Everglades

08/11/2010

Tampa Tribune

Editorial Staff

Saving wetlands, farms and the Everglades

The Tampa Tribune

Published: August 11, 2010

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A land deal in South Florida last month shows how it's possible to protect the environment, property rights and the agricultural industry at the same time.

And Thursday, the lengthy effort to restore the Everglades could take a big leap forward when South Florida Water Management District officials vote on a proposal to put more land under public control.

In July the federal government agreed to pay \$89 million for 26,000 acres of pastures and woodlands on the northern reaches of the Everglades. The goal is to protect Fisheating Creek watershed, which runs into Lake Okeechobee.

As U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam told The Associated Press: "You can't repair the lower Everglades without repairing the northern Everglades."

The acquisition of permanent conservation easements will allow the restoration of wetlands that filter water flowing into Okeechobee, whose waters flow into the Caloosahatchee River and then into the Gulf of Mexico. So, improving the water quality of the creek will have far-ranging benefits.

The deal also will protect key wildlife habitat and a popular site for camping and canoeing.

The landowners will be allowed to continue using the tract as a ranch, but they won't be able to develop it and will have to comply with special safeguards to protect the watershed. This will protect both jobs and habitat.

The agreement highlights how much progress has been made on the conservation front in the last 20 years.

In the late 1980s the Lykes family, which owns a major stretch of the creek and had protected it from development, sought to close it to the public. The family said it was trying to protect the waterway from litter and degradation. Former Attorney General Bob Butterworth effectively battled the move, with a court finding the creek was a navigable waterway and thus under state jurisdiction.

The legal battle ultimately was resolved when the parties agreed on a preservation plan. The state purchased an 18,272-acre corridor along the creek, which it established as the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area. Under

the deal, the Lykes family also agreed to limit use of another 42,000 acres.

The latest development, which involves four prominent ranching families, including that of state Sen. JD Alexander, will allow the further restoration of the resource. It is being acquired under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wetlands Reserve Program, a voluntary program that compensates landowners for preserving and restoring wetlands but which also allows continued use of the land.

The state uses a similar strategy when it buys the development rights to farmland. Such efforts spare the government from having to pay the full market price, but give landowners a powerful incentive to maximize the ecological value of their property.

The federal government's purchase of easements on this land north of Lake Okeechobee is well-timed. On Thursday, the South Florida Water Management District will decide whether to approve a deal to purchase another 26,800 acres - south of the big lake.

This land, owned by U.S. Sugar, is critical to restoring the Everglades. Under the agreement, the district board also has options to buy about 153,200 additional acres over the next 10 years if economic conditions permit it.

The pending proposal, which has been scaled back due mostly to economic concerns, warrants approval. About \$197.3 million from the water district's cash reserves would be used, allowing immediate public ownership of the land.

Taxpayers also are being protected with the modified proposal. The previous deal carried a price tag of \$536 million for 73,000 acres, with options to buy an additional 107,000 over 10 years. The district showed fiscal responsibility by amending the terms in light of the economy.

It is important to carefully scrutinize the restoration effort to make sure taxpayers get their money's worth.

And buying easements where possible will ensure a healthy future for Florida's natural resources and also for agriculture - Florida's second largest industry, whose importance to the economy and environment is often overlooked.

U.S. Sugar acquisition may not be such a sweet deal

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08/11/2010

Sun Sentinel

Editorial Staff

U.S. Sugar acquisition may not be such a sweet deal

THE ISSUE: Water managers decide on land deal.

It almost sounded too good to be true, and, in the end, it has turned out to be so.

The state of Florida, in effect, would buy out U.S. Sugar Co. and use its vast tracts to help clean and preserve water. If it worked out, the agreement would go down in history as a really sweet deal for the region and its water supply.

Unfortunately, the deal isn't that succulent, even as the South Florida Water Management District considers spending \$197 million on 26,800 acres in a watered-down deal that remains problematic. Restoration, not land acquisition, should be the main focus. So, on Thursday, the water district board should vote this deal down.

Approval of the sugar deal would further complicate an already Byzantine effort to restore the Florida Everglades. The purchase holds the promise of further land acquisition for storm water treatment and reservoirs — or left undeveloped as marshes — to store, treat and re-direct flowing water into the Everglades.

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But that decision would delay, or discard, some badly needed projects, like the unfinished reservoir in western Palm Beach County that has already cost taxpayers roughly \$280 million.

A federal judge has ordered the district to resume construction on that reservoir. The district is appealing that order. A decision is expected after the vote, which may tie up a significant portion of the district's budget needed for U.S.

Sugar property. The pending court ruling is just one of the many "ifs," "ands" and "buts" worth of moving parts that makes this decision even more difficult.

A bad economy and dwindling tax revenue is one thing. The pending court rulings, plus the competing interests of three sugar companies, only further complicate matters.

Acquiring land makes sense, but further acquisition of U.S. Sugar property over the next 10 years won't be accomplished by hope and a prayer. The district could raise taxes to buy land and complete essential projects, but there's no real stomach for that.

Tougher water quality standards to clean up water flowing through the Everglades would help, but the state isn't interested, and that would offend agricultural interests, including Big Sugar.

All this leaves water managers with Thursday's vote, one they see as an incremental step. There are better ways to spend the limited money the state has.

BOTTOM LINE: District should commit to projects, not U.S. Sugar.

Everglades Deal Downsized Again; Critics Still Aren't Buying it

08/11/2010

Sunshine State News

Ward, Kenric

Everglades Deal Downsized Again; Critics Still Aren't Buying it

South Florida water board to vote on \$197 million purchase of U.S. Sugar land

By: Kenric Ward | Posted: August 11, 2010 4:03 AM

Tags: Business, Charlie Crist, Everglades Foundation, Florida Crystals, Florida Everglades, Miccosukee tribe, News, South Florida Water Management District, Tea Party in Action, U.S. Sugar Corp., Politics

A downsized Everglades land deal is still a big deal to both sides as the South Florida Water Management District board meets this week.

In two days of meetings beginning Wednesday, the board will consider a proposal to acquire 26,800 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$197 million.

The Everglades Foundation calls the purchase essential.

"There is widespread agreement in the scientific community that Everglades restoration is virtually impossible without strategic land acquisitions within the Everglades Agricultural Area," said Richard Gibbs, spokesman for the Palmetto Bay-based foundation.

But the deal doesn't wash with critics who call it a "corporate bailout" for a sugar concern and gross political favor-trading by Gov. Charle Crist, who helped to engineer the sale for one of his prime campaign contributors.

The original plan involved 187,000 acres and all of U.S. Sugar's assets for \$1.75 billion, but it has been repeatedly trimmed as the district wrestles with budgetary shortfalls. The latest revision works out to a cost of \$7,400 per acre.

"The deal is still bad for taxpayers and still a bailout of the U.S. Sugar Corp.," said Marianne Moran, head of Tea Party in Action.

Moran said her group and others will be on hand at the district's headquarters in West Palm Beach to protest the proposed purchase, as they were during last month's board meeting.

"At the last meeting Chairman (Eric) Buermann told everyone that they had not figured out how to pay for this deal but would not raise property taxes," Moran related.

"There are only three ways to pay for this bad deal -- go into debt, use reserves or raise taxes. All three options are unacceptable to taxpayers on a deal that will only rescue the fortunes of U.S. Sugar under the guise of Everglades restoration," she said.

The water district's previous purchase plan is hung up in the Florida Supreme Court, as opponents, including Florida

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Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe, contest the district's proposed financing plan. By downsizing the acquisition, the district says it can swing the deal with cash on hand and avoid legal complications.

But officials have acknowledged that something will have to give, even with a smaller purchase price. If it proceeds with the land deal, the district may not have enough money to pay for both a half-built reservoir, which earlier this year a federal judge ordered the district to resume, and the new land -- all of which will be leased back to U.S. Sugar for 10 years.

The latest plan encompasses 17,900 citrus acres in Hendry County, which will be leased back to U.S. Sugar at no cost, and 8,900 sugar cane acres in Palm Beach County that carry a \$150 per-acre lease rate.

Gibbs said, "We recognize the challenging position that confronts the water district in financing a more ambitious land acquisition during a prolonged recession. At the same time, the state cannot afford to indefinitely delay efforts to save the Everglades and our water supply.

"The board should adopt this revised contract with the understanding that, as the state's fiscal condition improves, much more work needs to be done to save the Everglades and protect our water supply."

"In the abundance of caution to taxpayers, the governing board should be prudent and wait until the federal judge rules on whether it will be compelled to build the reservoir and not play Russian roulette with the taxpayers' money," Moran said.

U.S. Sugar Fights Wetlands Rule

08/09/2010

Courthouse News Service

Matt Reynolds

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WASHINGTON (CN) - One of the country's largest sugar growers is fighting a new federal rule designed to protect and restore subtropical wetlands in Florida. U.S. Sugar Corp. and the American Farm Bureau Federation claim that the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers' plan to regulate them under the Clean Water Act is illegal because the Corps "failed to provide a reasoned explanation for its decision" and "did not follow any of the requirements for an agency rulemaking."

Under the 2009 standard, the company's sugar land would be subject to federal environmental laws and "where applicable provide compensatory mitigation for impacts to wetlands."

U.S. Sugar owns 187,000 acres in Florida, more than 100,000 acres of it in the Everglades, southeast of Lake Okeechobee in Palm Beach County.

The Clinton administration exempted the plaintiffs' land from the Clean Water Act in 1993, allowing them to use land "converted" from wetlands before 1985. The amendment would make those areas federal waters.

"Loss of the exclusion requires farmers and others to get a permit, lowers the value of their land, and delays the intended use of the land by the farmer or others," the complaint states.

"Moreover, the land is devalued in the eyes of institutions that place value on the land for security purposes, such as banks, and for those farmers who may want to sell their property for development. Thus, the ... new rule constricts a farmer's ability to use his land for uses other than what the Corps deems to be 'agricultural use.'"

U.S. Sugar claims that acquiring new permits is "costly, and fraught with uncertainty" and prevents lessees from mining.

"U.S. Sugar has already lost revenue because no mined aggregate materials have been sold, and, under the terms of the lease, no aggregate sales means no lease payments or royalties to U.S. Sugar," the complaint states.

Represented by Karma Brown with Hunton & William, U.S. Sugar want the amendment and its enforcement enjoined.

Sugar deal shrinks yet again

08/08/2010

Florida Keys Keynoter

Morgan, Curtis

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For a third time, Gov. Charlie's Crist's bid to buy sugar farms for Everglades restoration is being downsized.

Pinched by a declining economy and legal rulings, South Florida water managers are proposing to take another massive whack at what started out more than two years ago as a blockbuster bid to buy out the entire U.S. Sugar Corp., including all its 180,000-plus acres for \$1.75 billion.

The deal now on the table: \$197 million for 26,800 acres, most of it citrus, and "options" to buy the remaining land at \$7,400 an acre over the next decade.

The South Florida Water Management District posted the revised contract online Wednesday. It was no secret that the agency, which was bankrolling the land buy, was struggling to afford the previous version of the land buy: \$536 million for 72,800 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields, with options on 107,500 more.

Eric Buermann, the district's chairman, said Crist, who had championed the land buy as part of his environmental legacy, understood the fiscal reality.

"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."

The district's budget, which comes largely from property taxes, had declined \$150 million since 2008

Florida weighs using cash for scaled-back Everglades purchase

08/07/2010

Daily Business Review

Miami Daily Business Review

From Bloomberg

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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.?

Land deal is pared again

08/06/2010

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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WEST PALM BEACH - 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 Okeechobee 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.

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.

Scaled-down Everglades plan would secure 27K acres

08/06/2010

Washington Post

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MIAMI -- 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."

ad_icon

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.

Third time's the charm for U.S. Sugar Deal?

08/06/2010

Florida Independent, The
Chamlee, Virginia

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The South Florida Water Management District posted a revised "Sugar Deal" contract on its website Wednesday. This latest version proposes \$197 million for 26,800 acres with an option to buy the remaining land at \$7,400 per acre. This marks the third downsize for the contract, which started out as a \$1.75 billion bid for more than 180,000 acres of the U.S. Sugar Corp's land.

In an Aug. 5 press release, Florida CFO Alex Sink commended the proposal, calling it "more fiscally responsible in these challenging economic times." Sink went on to say that the deal was a mutually beneficial one for the SFWMD and Floridians alike:

Because the SFWMD is using existing resources, no debt will be incurred and South Florida residents will not face property tax increases. The lands identified for purchase will also have a direct impact on improving water quality, addressing concerns raised in recent federal court decisions. And given my own advocacy of transparency and accountability in government, I compliment the SFWMD for posting the contract online to assure citizens are given accessible information in this process.

The Sugar Deal was originally intended as a solution for the copious amounts of phosphorus-loaded fertilizers that find their way into the Everglades after heavy farming on surrounding land. Should the SFWMD buy the land, they can use it to clean and restore the water, and therefore lessen the impact on the local ecosystem. Just this past week, the Everglades was again placed on a list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Danger.

