

Kevin Henderson: South Florida Water Management District board wrong to purchase land from U.S. Sugar

BY Kevin Henderson

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The history of Everglades restoration is littered with bait-and-switch tactics, most often via proposals with great fanfare and promises of public benefits, but eventually consummated into the dust of sordid backroom deals to benefit private interests. The latest iteration of the U.S. Sugar buyout, however, absolutely takes the cake.

Two years ago, Gov. Charlie Crist proposed a dramatic \$1.7 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar, including 180,000 acres of land, to re-establish the historic connection between Lake Okeechobee and Everglades. Thus, Everglades Restoration would change from a patchwork quilt of do-little projects into a real and exciting opportunity for genuine restoration. Cheers came from around the world.

It would have restored major wetlands within the Everglades Agricultural Area and historic flows from Lake O to the Everglades, and it would have helped restore coastal estuaries. Failed ideas such as aquifer storage wells were to be discarded. At last, the environment had a real chance to recover. Sure, the deal was costly, but it was worth it.

Bad economic times and political opposition from other sugar interests intervened, and last year the purchase was scaled back to 73,000 acres. Everglades, lake and estuary interests still championed the deal. Many workshops and meetings were conducted on how the land would be incorporated into a storage flow-way. There still were options to eventually purchase the rest of the land.

Fast-forward to today. The purchase acreage has been reduced again, to 26,800 acres. The price per acre stayed the same, but the location of the land has moved to the edges of the Everglades Agricultural Area. The most likely use for the proposed purchase is to construct more storm-water treatment areas to treat dirty EAA drainage, but wait; the public already paid for more than \$1 billion worth of storm-water treatment areas to improve private drainage water quality going to the Everglades. When does the EAA step up and clean at least some of its own water?

This new purchase plan is but a fig leaf to cover politicians who promised real restoration and now will not deliver. It's a huge bonus for U.S. Sugar, which will sell two parcels of land it no longer wants and the South Florida Water Management District does not need.

Some say the value of the land deal is in acreage to be swapped for other lands. If that

were true, the purchase land would be located where the soil still is deep and has value. The purchase land is not necessary for Everglades restoration or lake restoration. It has absolutely nothing to do with protecting coastal estuaries from huge, damaging discharges.

The truth is we have been victimized by bait-and-switch again. This is a bad deal. Unfortunately, many environmental advocacy groups have trouble switching from support to damnation as quickly as private and political interests can change the deal, especially when those interests always have a head start behind closed doors. So it's not easy to stand tall against a bad decision that has strong but misguided momentum.

In this case, opposition is the only right thing to do. Kill this deal and start fresh. And do it quickly.

Henderson, president of Evergreen Engineering in Stuart, is a member of the board of the St. Lucie River Initiative and the Rivers Coalition.



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