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Total Clips: 5

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Florida's GOP governor's race is battle of big spenders	08/19/2010	Miami Herald, The	Steve Bousquet
Miccoasukee seek halt to Everglades/US Sugar deal	08/19/2010	News From Indian Country	
Tea Party: Rick Scott Gets Top Marks; Not Bill McCollum, Who Won't Forsake Contributor	08/19/2010	Sunshine State News	Ward, Kenric
EDITORIAL: Our take on: Underwhelming Everglades deal & Seminole's FCAT success	08/19/2010	Orlando Sentinel	
S. Florida Water Management District Commits to Land Deal, Not Reservoir	08/19/2010	Engineering News-Record (ENR)	Wood, Debra

Florida's GOP governor's race is battle of big spenders

08/19/2010

Miami Herald, The
Steve Bousquet

[Return to Top](#)

As Rick Scott freely spends his fortune in his bid to become governor, Republican rival Bill McCollum is fighting to keep up by spending the millions of others.

McCollum's allies make up a long list: Big Sugar, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Progress Energy, real-estate developers, road builders, beer distributors, car dealers, nursing homes and wealthy individuals like Fort Lauderdale entrepreneur H. Wayne Huizenga and Dallas philanthropist Peter O'Donnell.

All have written hefty five- and six-figure checks to a pair of political committees controlled by McCollum, the state attorney general, as Scott and McCollum battle for the nomination in next Tuesday's primary.

McCollum's two groups, Florida First Initiative and Sunshine State Freedom Fund, have raked in a combined \$4.1 million to help fund a barrage of McCollum TV ads attacking Scott for his role in leading the Columbia/HCA hospital conglomerate, which was hit with record Medicare-fraud fines. McCollum, who has criticized Scott for trying to "buy the governor's mansion," said he's not selling out in taking special-interest money.

"If people want to contribute to me, generally speaking, I don't care who they are unless they have an unsavory background," McCollum said. "They can give to this campaign. They can give to me if they believe in my cause. That doesn't mean I believe in theirs."

McCollum said he's not sure, for instance, whether he supports a major buyout of U.S. Sugar lands in the name of Everglades restoration. U.S. Sugar has spent more than \$1.1 million to help McCollum.

"Our company has stepped up pretty significantly with Bill McCollum. But that's not unusual," said U.S. Sugar Corp. vice president and lobbyist Bob Coker. "We don't sit down and say, 'We've given you \$49, therefore, we expect blah

blah blah.' That's not our game. We expect someone who's going to be fair and who will allow us to espouse our views."

Coker said he has known McCollum for decades and has respected the candidate's work ethic and principled approach to issues. He acknowledged U.S. Sugar contributed to a secretive political committee, The League of American Voters, which does not have to disclose its donors under federal tax law because it is a 501(c)4 nonprofit activist group. The league has contributed \$550,000 to one of McCollum's committees.

Scott's campaign issued a statement demanding that the league disclose its donors.

McCollum said he "didn't have knowledge" of the league and that he "didn't have any contact" with its members. So he won't call on the group to disclose its donors.

To read the complete article, visit www.miamiherald.com.

Miccoasukee seek halt to Everglades/US Sugar deal

08/19/2010

[Return to Top](#)

News From Indian Country

Business News - Native Business News

West Palm Beach, Florida (AP) August 2010

The Miccosukee Indians are seeking to stop the state from purchasing agricultural land in the Everglades, arguing the deal will stall other key restoration projects.

The tribe during August filed an emergency motion in federal court in Miami. They want a judge to stop the South Florida Water Management District from purchasing 26,791 acres for about \$197.4 million from U.S. Sugar.

The state says the land will be used to help restore the Everglades, suffering from years of dikes and diversions to make way for homes and farms.

The initial deal announced in 2008 was to pay \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres, but it has been scaled back, in part, because of the economy.

Tea Party: Rick Scott Gets Top Marks; Not Bill McCollum, Who Won't Forsake Contributor

08/19/2010

[Return to Top](#)

Sunshine State News

Ward, Kenric

A tea party group downgraded Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum on its conservative report card for failing to sign a pledge opposing the "bailout" of U.S. Sugar Corp.

The pledge was part of a questionnaire sent by Tea Party in Action to political candidates across the state to gauge their positions on issues important to the tea partiers. The group's executive director Marianne Moran said McCollum's failure to sign the pledge deprived him from earning a perfect score and matching his rival Rick Scott.

"While Rick Scott scored a perfect score, his opponent for the gubernatorial nod, Attorney General Bill McCollum, earned a lesser degree of support because he wavered on a key issue. Attorney General McCollum declined to sign his name to a pledge to oppose the U.S. Sugar Corp. bailout," Moran said in a statement.

She said the absence of McCollum's signature left his questionnaire incomplete.

Moran said she contacted McCollum's campaign "several times" in an effort to get the candidate to sign the pledge. "But they declined," she said.

McCollum spokeswoman Kristy Campbell sidestepped the signature dispute and questioned the tea group's "bailout" reference. "That (original) deal is not on the table any more," she said.

Nearly three years after the deal was engineered by now-independent Gov. Charlie Crist, the South Florida Water Management District's governing board voted last week to proceed with a scaled-down purchase of 28,000 acres for \$197 million, ostensibly to restore a portion of the Everglades.

Tea party groups, including Moran's, oppose the U.S. Sugar land acquisition, calling it a politically driven raid on taxpayer funds that will do little or nothing to help the Everglades.

Joining tea partiers rallying outside SFWMD's West Palm Beach headquarters, Scott accused McCollum of being in U.S. Sugar's pocket.

"During the course of his campaign, McCollum and his attack groups have directly or indirectly received nearly \$1 million from U.S. Sugar. He has cut a secret deal supporting a secret tax," Scott charged.

Campbell called Scott's tax allegations "ludicrous" and "out of touch with reality."

"(McCollum) has pledged not to raise taxes," she said.

Campbell added that federal courts have mandated that certain Everglades restoration projects move forward.

Moran listed hundreds of candidates who completed and signed her group's questionnaire, which also included questions on immigration, a balanced budget, limited government and "Obamacare."

The document was mailed to candidates around Aug. 7-8, she said.

Moran said McCollum still has time to sign the pledge.

"If he wants to sign that's OK. He would (then) have the perfect score," she said.

Meanwhile, Moran stated, "The results of our questionnaire will be distributed to every tea party group in the state of Florida, and will be spread on Facebook, Twitter and the grass-roots network in order to help citizens decide whom they will support in the Aug. 24 primary."

Hundreds of candidates across Florida responded to the group's questionnaire, she said. The survey was sent to all candidates for legislative, local and statewide office. Topping the list of like-minded respondents, besides Rick Scott for governor, was Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, candidate for attorney general.

View the list of respondents here.

Contact Kenric Ward at kward@sunshinestatenews.com or at (772) 801-5341.

EDITORIAL: Our take on: Underwhelming Everglades deal & Seminole's FCAT success

[Return to Top](#)

08/19/2010

Orlando Sentinel

Underwhelming deal

If Gov. Charlie Crist hoped to generate a public relations ripple from the decision last week to buy and restore some U. S. Sugar land polluting the Everglades, it's not happening.

No wonder. The governor's original 2008 plan was to buy out U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres and operations for \$1.75 billion. While too generous, it offered a credible path to help clean and rejuvenate the River of Grass.

In contrast, this latest version won't manage much.

The state would acquire just 28,000 acres of polluted citrus and cane parcels for a still overly generous \$197 million (Environmentalists agree the state needs about four times as much acreage to clean the Everglades).

It's not certain that the deal would get the courts to back off the state, which they say hasn't done enough to protect the Glades. And the South Florida Water Management District only has "conceptual" plans of what to do with the land it would buy.

All of which explains the missing ripple. But where's the backlash?

Seminole's success

For weeks, late FCAT scores and questions over their validity demolished public confidence in the state's accountability cornerstone.

Like many other districts, Seminole County Public Schools called attention to what district officials considered anomalous results.

Now that the dust has settled, Seminole's faith in the scores appears shored up.

A good report will do that.

Long rated an "A" district, Seminole FCAT scores leapt from seventh last year to third best in state this year.

The state crunches percentages in eight categories, including students who meet high standards in the three Rs and also learning gains among the lowest 25 percent in reading and math.

District officials deserve a pat on the back — as do Seminole teachers who lay the groundwork for student success.

S. Florida Water Management District Commits to Land Deal, Not Reservoir

[Return to Top](#)

08/19/2010

Engineering News-Record (ENR)

Wood, Debra

Further reducing the scope of a land-purchase agreement originally proposed by Gov. Charlie Crist (I), the South Florida Water Management District agreed on Aug. 12 to purchase approximately 26,800 acres in the Everglades from the U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$197 million.

The district will acquire the land in the Everglades Agricultural Area and C-139 basin for water-quality and environmental restoration projects. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) plans to close on the property in Hendry and Palm Beach counties in October. The deal includes options for up to 10 years to purchase 153,000 more acres from U.S. Sugar at a price of \$7,400 per acre. After that exclusive option period, the district will hold a two-year, non-exclusive, right-of-first-refusal, fair-market-value option on 46,800 specifically identified acres as well as a subsequent seven-year, non-exclusive, right-of-first-refusal, fair-market-value option on the balance of the acreage.

"Despite our disappointment that the U.S. Sugar buyout plan had to be reduced dramatically because of the economy, the Everglades Trust is nonetheless pleased that Florida did not let this opportunity slip through our fingers entirely," said Thom Rumberger, chairman of the Everglades Trust, in an e-mail response to a request for comment.

In June 2008, Gov. Crist announced plans to purchase 187,000 acres from U.S. Sugar for \$1.75 billion. Due to the faltering economy and declining revenues, SFWMD's governing board, in May 2009, first revised down the agreement to 73,000 acres for \$536 million. The roughly 27,000 acres included in the deal's latest version represents less than one-sixth of the amount originally proposed.

The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians filed a motion for a temporary emergency injunction to block the land purchase, fearing the district will not have the funds necessary to continue reservoir construction. The Miccosukee specifically are targeting the construction of Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir A-1, one of the projects authorized under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

A joint venture of Barnard Construction Co., Bozeman, Mont., and Parsons Water & Infrastructure, Pasadena, Calif., began work on the \$480-million reservoir project in summer 2006. The joint venture had completed \$234 million of construction and was negotiating a \$300-million contract to build a related dam when SFWMD suspended the project in May 2008—around the time of Gov. Crist's original announcement of the U.S. Sugar deal—citing pending litigation with environmental groups.

The joint venture had finished portions of the project, including digging seepage canals, removing muck and setting up water controls. By fall 2007, the project was three months and \$7 million ahead of schedule, according to Jeff Kivett, department director of SFWMD's Everglades restoration engineering department. The district paid the joint venture \$12 million to settle claims related to work stoppage, according to SFWMD board minutes. SFWMD since has referred to the project as "ultimately terminated."

In April 2010, U.S. District Judge Federico A. Moreno in Miami granted the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians' motion to compel completion of the reservoir and referred the matter to a so-called special master to set deadlines. SFWMD spokesman Randy Smith says Judge Moreno's decision is going through further legal review, and no work is being done at the site.

The water district asserts the land purchase will not impact its ability to fund construction. "The U.S. Sugar land is being paid for in cash from the capital reserve account which was earmarked for land acquisition," Smith says.

Eric Buermann, SFWMD board chairman, said at an Aug. 12 press conference the district will argue the U.S. Sugar land purchase is a better plan than continuing work on the reservoir. The purchase will not restore the Everglades on its own, and construction of storage, treatment and pumping facilities are still needed, he said.

