

Letters: Facts don't change: Everglades needs land

By **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR FOR MONDAY, AUG. 23**

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Much has changed in the two years since Gov. Crist stood on the edge of America's Everglades and called upon the South Florida Water Management District to negotiate a historic land acquisition with U.S. Sugar Corp. that would help restore this national treasure.

Since 2008, the district has lost \$150 million in tax revenue. Legal challenges have drawn the acquisition out in the courts. Recent federal court rulings have changed the landscape of restoration planning. What has remained constant is the need for more land south of Lake Okeechobee, whether through this acquisition or from another willing seller, to achieve water quality improvements.

A second amended acquisition, just approved by the district governing board and U.S. Sugar's board of directors, keeps that dream alive while addressing new fiscal constraints and legal obligations. The modified contract calls for the district to use \$197 million in cash on-hand - already reserved for land acquisition and restoration projects - to purchase approximately 26,800 acres. The agency retains options over 10 years to acquire U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,200 acres, should economic conditions allow.

The acquisition consists of two strategic parcels. One, just west of two of the agency's water treatment wetlands, is 17,900 acres of citrus land in Hendry County. This site will be used to improve water quality in the C-139 agricultural basin. The second parcel is 8,900 acres of sugar cane land in Palm Beach County. This will be used to enhance treatment wetlands to help meet federally mandated water quality targets in the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

Along with achieving important water quality benefits, this latest version of the purchase fulfills the governing board's pledge not to increase taxes or hamper the district's ability to carry out its core missions. By paying for the initial acreage with cash saved during better times, the district saves taxpayers millions of dollars that would have been spent on debt payments.

New realities have forced the district to rethink how to approach the River of Grass acquisition in a fiscally responsible way. However, the benefits of this rare opportunity remain as clear as ever.

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Editor's note: Eric Buermann is chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.