

Kevin Powers: Criticism of U.S. Sugar land acquisition ignores key facts

BY Kevin Powers

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Advocates for the St. Lucie River cheered in June 2008 when the South Florida Water Management District began negotiating with the U.S. Sugar Corp., to acquire as much as 187,000 acres of land for Everglades restoration. For Martin and St. Lucie County residents, the proposed \$1.75 billion land acquisition offered an opportunity to provide much-needed water storage facilities south of Lake Okeechobee and to limit federal freshwater lake releases that have plagued the river and its estuary.

At its Aug. 12 meeting, the district governing board approved a scaled-down — but no less historic — agreement that is in line with the realities facing the agency today. Under the amended contract, the district will use \$197 million in cash already set aside for land acquisition and restoration projects to initially purchase 26,800 acres of land. The agreement includes options for up to 10 years for the district to purchase the remaining acreage should economic conditions allow.

Some Treasure Coast supporters of the original U.S. Sugar acquisition now oppose this latest agreement, claiming it will not do enough to protect the estuary. While this frustration is understandable, especially after this year's set of damaging lake releases, the criticism ignores several fundamental factors that have shaped the acquisition.

Most important, the immediate and necessary focus for the U.S. Sugar properties is to address pending federal court proceedings related to improving water quality in the Everglades. The acquisition will expand existing efforts to treat water moving through the South Florida ecosystem, which requires strategically located land.

The two parcels in the amended U.S. Sugar purchase can achieve these water quality improvements in key areas. The district can immediately use the 17,900 acres of citrus groves in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of sugarcane land in Palm Beach County to expand the network of treatment wetlands that has proven so effective at cleaning Everglades-bound water.

To date, no other land options have been forwarded to the district to achieve these objectives in a better location at a better price. Without additional proposals, it is in the best financial interest of taxpayers to deal with willing sellers as opposed to the last resort, condemnation, which can cost millions of dollars in legal fees.

Additionally, the district must accomplish all of this in a vastly different economic climate than the one in which the original acquisition was proposed. Since 2008, the

agency's revenues have declined by \$150 million. Recognizing those fiscal constraints, the Governing Board has taken great care to honor its pledge to complete the land purchase without increasing the burden on taxpayers or impairing the district's ability to meet its core missions. This amended purchase also preserves funding for constructing water quality improvement projects in the future.

It is important not to make the mistake of viewing the initial 26,800-acre acquisition as a last step. The district has another decade to buy the remaining acreage. But even if all the land was available now, it would not provide instant relief for the estuary without storage and water quality improvement projects.

The St. Lucie estuary is a natural treasure that is key to our way of life on the Treasure Coast. As a Martin County resident, I believe the estuary should enjoy the same water quality protections afforded the Everglades. At the moment, however, federal and state laws dictate that the quality and quantity of water flowing south to the Everglades is subject to stricter regulations than that dumped on our estuary. This must change.

The district is working to achieve water quality improvements for the St. Lucie, with limited resources and a vast South Florida ecosystem that needs our help. To that end, we continue to look for new and innovative ways to store water north and south of the lake to help protect our unique and precious estuary.

Powers, partner in the Indiantown Realty Corp., sits on the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District.



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