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Total Clips: 12

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
State finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar	10/13/2010	WINK-TV	
Water Managers, U.S. Sugar Close On Land Deal	10/13/2010	WPBF-TV	
Florida finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar	10/13/2010	Bloomberg BusinessWeek	
Deal to buy land for Everglades restoration OK'd at cost of \$197M	10/13/2010	Detroit News	
\$197 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar completed	10/13/2010	Sun Sentinel	Reid, Andy
Florida's Everglades buyout shrinks to fraction of promised restoration	10/13/2010	St. Petersburg Times	Pittman, Craig
U.S. Sugar's Florida land buy finalized	10/13/2010	South Florida Business Journal	Brinkmann, Paul
Everglades \$194 million land buy is completed	10/13/2010	Palm Beach Post	
Florida Buys U.S. Sugar Land In Hendry/Palm Beach	10/12/2010	Southwest Florida Online	Browne, Don
EVERGLADES: Once-historic land deal closes with little fanfare	10/12/2010	Greenwire	Quinlan, Paul
State completes U.S. Sugar land deal for Everglades restoration	10/12/2010	Florida Independent, The	Tristram Korten
Florida finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar	10/12/2010	Associated Press (AP) - Miami Bureau	Sedensky, Matt

State finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar

10/13/2010
WINK-TV

[Return to Top](#)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) - A \$197 million deal to turn over nearly 27,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land to the state in an effort to restore the Everglades is finally done.

The South Florida Water Management District transferred all but \$3 million of the money to U.S. Sugar on Tuesday. The balance is the company's contribution to environmental cleanup costs.

Environmentalists cheered the money transfer, which ended two years of court battles and scaling back of the initial deal.

The amount of land being transferred is just one-ninth the size originally planned. The state has the option to purchase the rest.

Water Managers, U.S. Sugar Close On Land Deal

10/13/2010

WPBF-TV

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- Florida is now the proud owner of U.S. Sugar land.

The South Florida Water Management District on Tuesday closed on a deal to buy nearly 27,000 acres of land in Palm Beach and Hendry counties from U.S. Sugar for about \$197.4 million.

Land surveys have been approved, signed and sealed, and the title has been reviewed and accepted.

State officials intend to use the land for Everglades restoration.

The original plan, announced in 2008, was to pay \$1.75 billion for all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres, but it was later scaled back. However, SFWMD officials said the state still has the option to purchase the remaining property from U.S. Sugar.

Gov. Charlie Crist praised the purchase, saying in a statement that it "creates significant opportunities for Florida's environment."

SFWMD officials said U.S. Sugar is paying all recording and title costs.

Previous Stories:

- * August 12, 2010: Water Managers Approve Scaled Back U.S. Sugar Land Deal
- * July 14, 2010: Tea Party Protests U.S. Sugar Land Purchase
- * March 11, 2010: U.S. Sugar Land Deal Gets Contract Extension
- * December 18, 2008: Governor Praises Approval Of U.S. Sugar Buyout
- * December 16, 2008: SFWMD Approves \$1.34 Billion U.S. Sugar Buyout
- * November 24, 2008: Full-Page Ad Announces U.S. Sugar Buy Competition
- * November 11, 2008: State Scales Back Plans To Buy U.S. Sugar Land
- * August 1, 2008: Lawsuit: U.S. Sugar Deal Violated Sunshine Law
- * June 24, 2008: Gov. Crist Announces \$1.7 Billion Sugar, Everglades Deal

Florida finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar

10/13/2010

Bloomberg BusinessWeek

[Return to Top](#)

By MATT SEDENSKY
WEST PALM BEACH, Fla.

A \$197 million attempt to restore the Everglades by turning over a swath of sugar farmland to the state was finalized Tuesday, ending two years of court battles and scaling back of the initial deal.

The South Florida Water Management District transferred all but about \$3 million of the funds to U.S. Sugar to complete the agreement for 26,791 acres. The balance was the company's contribution toward cleanup costs.

Though the deal is a fraction of the size initially planned when it was announced with fanfare in 2008 by Gov. Charlie Crist, environmentalists lauded the news.

The Everglades Foundation called it a "significant advancement." The Sierra Club said the move would "give future generations of Floridians a chance to enjoy the Everglades as it was before the 20th Century."

Crist said it puts Florida "one step closer to making our dreams of true restoration for the Everglades a reality."

Critics, including U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals, have derided the deal as a waste of taxpayer money.

The initial land purchase is about one-ninth the size that was originally planned. The state had planned to pay \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres, but the faltering economy led to repeated scale-backs.

"The economy threw them a wicked curve," said Judy Sanchez, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sugar.

The revised deal still gives the state the option to purchase the remainder of the land over the next decade.

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.

Deal to buy land for Everglades restoration OK'd at cost of \$197M

10/13/2010

Detroit News

[Return to Top](#)

Fort Lauderdale, Fla. — A \$197 million deal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland for Everglades restoration finally went through Tuesday morning after more than two years of economic hurdles and legal fights. Florida property taxpayers are picking up the tab for a 26,800-acre deal that environmental groups hail as chance to acquire strategically located farmland long off limits to efforts to restore water flows to the Everglades. Critics, led by the Miccosukee Tribe and U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals, have called it a boondoggle that costs taxpayers too much, takes money from other overdue Everglades projects and unfairly enriches U.S. Sugar at taxpayer expense.

\$197 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar completed

10/13/2010

Sun Sentinel

Reid, Andy

[Return to Top](#)

Done deal.

A \$197 million taxpayer-funded deal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland for Everglades restoration went through Tuesday after more than two years of economic hurdles and legal fights.

Supporters hail the latest scaled-down version of the deal as a historic opportunity to get 26,800 acres of farmland once off limits to Everglades restoration -- with a chance to buy more in the future.

Opponents say it costs taxpayers too much and takes money away from other overdue Everglades projects.

Now that the South Florida Water Management District owns the land, officials must find a way to pay for building the stormwater storage and treatment areas envisioned to help get more clean water flowing to the Everglades. "There's a lot of work to be done," district board Chairman Eric Buermann said. "Now the hard part starts."

Why buy U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration?

State officials as well as environmental groups contend that acquiring more farmland south of Lake Okeechobee will help long-delayed restoration efforts.

They envision building a series of reservoirs and treatment areas to hold and clean up polluted stormwater now drained away for flood control. That can provide more water needed to replenish the Everglades and boost South Florida water supplies.

Sugar growers had long balked at parting with farmland that was once part of the Everglades. The U.S. Sugar deal opens up the door to getting at least 26,800 acres to add to more than 233,000 acres already acquired elsewhere for restoration.

"We are now one step closer to assembling the key parcels that are necessary to rescue the Everglades from decades of pollution," Everglades Foundation CEO Kirk Fordham said Tuesday.

What does the deal cost and what do taxpayers get?

It costs \$197 million, which comes from property-tax revenue collected by the South Florida Water Management District, which leads the Everglades restoration.

The 26,800 acres acquired Tuesday is composed of two big pieces: 17,900 acres of citrus land in Hendry County, beside existing stormwater-treatment areas; and 8,900 acres of sugar cane land in Palm Beach County, east of Lake Okeechobee.

The deal gives the district a 10-year option to buy U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,000 acres. Buying more U.S. Sugar land within three years would allow the district to keep the \$7,400-per-acre price set for the initial deal. Beyond three years, the district could buy more at "fair market value" and would have the right to counter any other offers U.S. Sugar gets for its land.

How has the deal changed through the years?

Gov. Charlie Crist in June 2008 first proposed a \$1.75 billion plan to buy all of U.S. Sugar's more than 180,000 acres, sugar mill and other facilities.

Initially, the plan was to use U.S. Sugar's property to help build storage and treatment areas that could recreate the "missing link" in the Everglades, where stormwater once naturally flowed from Lake Okeechobee south to Florida Bay.

The economic downturn and plummeting property-tax revenues led to downsizing the original deal three times. "By gaining access to hundreds of square miles of prime property, the River of Grass and the wildlife that depend on it face a brighter and more secure future," Crist said in a statement Tuesday.

What were the concerns about buying U.S. Sugar land?

Opponents of the deal, led by the Miccosukee Tribe and U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals, argue that the scaled-down version of the deal still costs taxpayers too much, will take money from other overdue Everglades projects and unfairly enriches U.S. Sugar at taxpayers' expense.

The Miccosukees and U.S. Sugar waged an unsuccessful legal fight.

They point to an unfinished Everglades restoration reservoir in southwestern Palm Beach County as proof that the U.S. Sugar deal will mean more construction delays. The reservoir already cost South Florida taxpayers almost \$280 million, but was put on hold while the district weighed whether to proceed with the U.S. Sugar deal.

Now the district envisions turning the unfinished reservoir into a less-expensive water-treatment area.

Opponents also question why the \$7,400-per-acre price, based on two-year-old appraisals, remained unchanged.

"You would think it's a joke," Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens said about the deal. "This was all politically driven by Charlie Crist."

How will the 26,800 acres be used?

Construction plans remain in flux, but the options include building water storage and treatment areas to increase the quantity and quality of stormwater headed to the Everglades.

The 17,900 acres in Hendry County could be used to store more water and to expand existing stormwater-treatment areas around the property, according to the district.

The 8,900 acres in northern Palm Beach County could be used to treat more water that gets directed to the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, the northern reaches of the Everglades. The land also could be traded for other farmland farther south intended for restoration.

What are the hurdles to putting the land to use?

Before the U.S. Sugar land can be used for Everglades restoration, pollution from decades of farming must be cleaned up. The district anticipates it will have to spend about \$7 million for environmental cleanups aimed at pesticides, fertilizer and petroleum embedded in the soil. U.S. Sugar is contributing about \$3 million to those costs.

Finding a way to pay for construction of reservoirs and treatment areas remains the biggest hurdle. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in September called for a revised Everglades cleanup effort that the district estimates would include construction projects and other costs that could reach about \$1.5 billion to implement. District officials say they don't have \$1.5 billion.

What happens to U.S. Sugar?

Back in 2008, U.S. Sugar planned to sell all its land to the district and eventually close down or transition into another industry. Now the company can keep farming and producing sugar, with an infusion of money from taxpayers.

The deal allows U.S. Sugar at least initially to keep using the land it just sold for Everglades restoration.

The earliest the district can take possession of the Hendry County land is June 2012. The district can't use the 8,900 acres in Palm Beach County until May 2013.

U.S. Sugar can keep using the citrus land rent free — while continuing to pay property taxes — until the district is ready to take possession. As for the sugar cane land, U.S. Sugar pays \$150 per acre per year to lease that property for up to 20 years.

When will the Everglades see tangible results from this deal?

How soon the Everglades can benefit depends on how soon the district can get the money to start construction.

District property-tax revenues have dropped about \$150 million since 2008 because of the struggling economy.

Buermann, the district chairman, estimates that the agency can get some of the initial stormwater-treatment areas completed in two to five years.

"We got the property, so the next step is to ... make it go to good," Buermann said.

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Florida's Everglades buyout shrinks to fraction of promised restoration

[Return to Top](#)

10/13/2010

St. Petersburg Times

Pittman, Craig

Two years ago, Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled what looked to be the biggest triumph ever in the somewhat rocky history of Everglades restoration: a \$1.75 billion deal to buy out U.S. Sugar lock, stock and sugar mills — and, most important, take over 187,000 acres.

On Tuesday, the state finally closed on the deal. The end result is greatly diminished from Crist's original promise. For \$197 million, the state gets just 26,800 acres, a mere one-seventh of what was originally envisioned.

Some environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and the Everglades Foundation, hailed the scaled-down buyout as an important step forward. Others saw in it a poor omen for the future.

"I'm not opening any champagne, and I hope nobody else does," said Stuart Pimm, a Duke University biologist who has spent years studying endangered species in the Everglades.

What happened with the sugar buyout, Pimm pointed out, is what has happened with everything related to Everglades restoration since the project was launched a decade ago: Officials propose something with big promise, then postpone it, then settle for something smaller or drop it entirely.

To see this happen each time, Pimm said, "breaks your heart."

The repeated letdowns have left some Everglades advocates unsure about its future.

"I am very pessimistic at this point — more pessimistic than I have ever been in the past 15 years," said retired Col. Terry Rice, who was in charge of the Army Corps of Engineers in Florida when it first began planning to restore the Everglades. He has also worked as a consultant for the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, which tried to block the buyout.

One of the most promising projects aimed at restoring the slow flow of the River of Grass called for raising part of the Tamiami Trail, Pimm said. The corps said raising 11 miles of the highway across the Everglades would provide the greatest environmental benefits, and that plan was endorsed by environmental groups and local government.

But then the corps, citing the expense, scaled back, Pimm said, breaking ground this winter for a project designed to raise just a single mile of the road.

Similarly, the restoration plan approved in 2000 was a bold one. It called for ripping out some of the canals and levees that had drained the River of Grass over the years, while supplementing its flow with man-made marshes and gigantic pumps. The funding was to be split 50-50 between state and federal budgets.

After Sept. 11, 2001, though, federal funding largely dried up, so Florida's taxpayers carried the load alone. So far the state has spent more than \$2.4 billion, mostly on land acquisition. The lack of federal participation led to lengthy delays in the start of several segments of the project, driving up their cost. Meanwhile, the National Research Council noted in a report released last month, the Everglades' own ecosystems showed a continued decline.

The blame lies not just with the federal government, but also with state politics, with each of three governors launching Everglades initiatives, Rice said.

Gov. Lawton Chiles backed the original Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, he said. Gov. Jeb Bush's Acceler-8 program was aimed at pushing ahead primarily on some water supply projects. Then Gov. Crist dropped Acceler-8 in favor of his own U.S. Sugar buyout, Rice said.

The shifting state priorities keep throwing restoration off track, he said. And until Obama administration officials provide strong leadership to get the project back on track, he said, it's likely to happen again.

Crist's proposed sugar buyout stumbled when the collapse of Florida's real estate market led to declining tax revenues, forcing the state to reduce its purchase.

"We had no control over the economy taking a skid," said Eric Buehrmann, chairman of the South Florida Water Management District, the state agency that bought the land. "We felt it was prudent to get the land we could afford."

The land the state bought Tuesday includes 17,900 acres of citrus in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of sugar cane land in Palm Beach County. The deal also gives the district a 10-year option to buy U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,000 acres.

The earliest the district can take possession of the citrus land is 2012. It can take possession of the 9,000 acres of sugar cane land in 2013. The state will spend the time before that obtaining the necessary permits for the work to be done there.

Everglades Foundation president Kirk Fordham said the buyout will help with a neglected aspect of the restoration, providing areas that can be used for cleaning pollution out of the water flowing into the Everglades.

The foundation commissioned an economic study that found the \$15 billion restoration project could create more than 400,000 jobs in everything from fishing to real estate, generating up to \$123 billion in economic benefits. For instance, Fordham said, it would be easier to sell a house on a waterway that's no longer full of polluted water from Lake Okeechobee.

Ironically, the greatest boost for Everglades restoration has come as a result of the same problem that forced the state to scale back the sugar buyout: the economic meltdown. The reason: The stimulus bill provided funding for several key segments of the Everglades project that were ready to roll when money at last became available.

The question now is who will have the money to push the Everglades project forward from here. There's little likelihood of more stimulus money coming from Congress. Meanwhile, environmental activists say they worry that whoever replaces Crist as governor won't make the Everglades a priority.

"Here we have this beautiful national park and we're harming it," Pimm said. "We're the richest country on earth and we can't save it."

Craig Pittman can be reached at craig@sptimes.com.

U.S. Sugar's Florida land buy finalized

10/13/2010

South Florida Business Journal

Brinkmann, Paul

[Return to Top](#)

The state's purchase of 26,790 acres of sugar and citrus farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. was finalized on Tuesday with a significantly reduced price tag of \$197 million.

The purchase of croplands and wetlands south of Lake Okeechobee is considered critical for improving water quality and ecosystem restoration in the Everglades.

"Although the economy threw them a wicked curve, the [water district] stayed on course," U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez said.

Sanchez said U.S. Sugar plans to continue working with the district on use of other lands in the area to provide water treatment necessary to revive Lake Okeechobee, the coastal estuaries and the Florida Everglades.

On Aug. 12, the district's board approved the final plan for the purchase, which includes options to acquire about 153,200 more acres in the next 10 years.

The latest version is a fraction of the larger vision announced by Gov. Charlie Crist in 2008. At that time, Crist proposed the South Florida Water Management District buy 187,000 acres south of Lake Okeechobee for up to \$1.7 billion. The deal was downsized several times.

The district had said the smaller plan was necessary due to two factors: a decline of \$150 million in district revenue since 2008, and the need to address recent federal court orders related to Everglades restoration.

The latest plan includes 17,900 citrus acres in Hendry County and 8,900 sugar cane acres in Palm Beach County.

Read more: U.S. Sugar's Florida land buy finalized - South Florida Business Journal

Everglades \$194 million land buy is completed

10/13/2010

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post

It's a done deal. At 9:10 am on Tuesday — after 2-1/2 years of negotiations — the South Florida Water Management District transferred \$194,234,087.08 from its bank account to U.S. Sugar Corp. and took ownership of nearly 27,000 acres of land needed to restore the Everglades.

The deal began in May 2008, when Gov. Charlie Crist announced that the state had reached a deal with U.S. Sugar to purchase 197,000 acres of land for \$1.7 billion.

As the economy tanked, the deal shrank to \$536 million for 73,000 acres and then to \$197 million for 26,900 acres.

As part of the deal the District has an option to purchase more land from U.S. Sugar for restoration.

Florida Buys U.S. Sugar Land In Hendry/Palm Beach

10/12/2010

[Return to Top](#)

Southwest Florida Online

Browne, Don

CLEWISTON, FL. -- The South Florida Water Management District closed on the purchase of land from the United States Sugar Corporation, providing 26,800 acres of property south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration. The \$194 million acquisition places 42 square miles of agricultural land into public ownership for the construction of water quality improvement projects.

Highlights of the acquisition include:

-Acquisition of 17,900 citrus acres in Hendry County to improve water quality in the C-139 Basin, where phosphorus loads have been historically high. This parcel, just west of thousands of acres of existing constructed wetlands, can be used for additional water storage and treatment facilities that would improve the quality of water flowing into the Everglades.

-Purchase of 8,900 acres of sugarcane land in Palm Beach County to benefit the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge by expanding existing Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) and increasing water quality treatment for the S-5A Basin, just southeast of Lake Okeechobee.

The agreement contains options to purchase another 153,000 acres for up to 10 years should future economic conditions allow. The options to acquire additional lands, which provide further opportunities to benefit the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, include:

An exclusive 3-year option to purchase either a specifically identified 46,800 acres or the entire 153,000 acres at a fixed price of \$7,400 per acre. U.S. Sugar could sell the option property to a third party but must retain the District's option.

After the exclusive option period, a subsequent 2-year, non-exclusive option to purchase the approximately 46,800 acres at Fair Market Value. U.S. Sugar could sell all or a part of the option property, but subject to a Right of First Refusal by the District.

A subsequent 7-year, non-exclusive option to purchase the remaining acres at Fair Market Value. U.S. Sugar could sell all or a part of the option property, but subject to a Right of First Refusal by the District.

In identifying the 26,800 acres for this acquisition, the District evaluated science and engineering factors as well as its existing requirements and mandates, all of which drive the agency's restoration and water quality improvement efforts. This acquisition, together with additional lands in the Everglades Agricultural Area already in public ownership, gives the District access to more than 40,000 acres of land south of Lake Okeechobee needed for water quality and restoration project construction.

Today's closing is the culmination of more than two years of work since the District began negotiations with the U.S. Sugar Corporation in June 2008 to acquire land south of Lake Okeechobee for Everglades restoration. This downsized acquisition recognizes changes in economic conditions over the last two years, which have resulted in a decline in District property tax revenues by nearly \$150 million, or 30 percent, since 2008, although the tax revenues are even or above years before the historic highs of the mid 2000 years.

EVERGLADES: Once-historic land deal closes with little fanfare

10/12/2010

Greenwire

Quinlan, Paul

[Return to Top](#)

What started out with a bang more than two years ago -- an ambitious Florida governor's plan to save the Everglades by buying out a sugar company -- ended with a whimper today.

The \$1.75 billion deal that independent Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled in June 2008 closed at a fraction of its original size.

From a plan to buy 187,000 acres of sugarcane and citrus fields, a hulking sugar mill and railroad lines ended as a \$194 million purchase of 26,791 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp.

The deal shrunk as the real estate market shriveled and took with it state tax revenues. Meanwhile, the state faced lawsuits from a competing sugar grower.

More than congratulations, state water managers say they need money -- to do something with the newly acquired land and to comply with U.S. EPA orders to build more pollution-filtering marshes to soak up phosphorus flowing off former farm fields into the River of Grass.

Federal judges and EPA are demanding the state make substantial investments along new and specific timelines to reduce the phosphorous to a level that was supposed to have been reached in 2006. EPA has ordered the state to build another 40,000 acres of artificial marshes by 2020.

The land deal still includes a 10-year option to purchase the rest of U.S. Sugar's farmland, a move that would set the table for the large-scale replumbing of the Everglades that Crist and environmentalists had hoped for.

State completes U.S. Sugar land deal for Everglades restoration

10/12/2010

Florida Independent, The

Tristram Korten

[Return to Top](#)

The South Florida Water Management District closed on the purchase of nearly 27,000 acres of Everglades wetlands today by wiring \$197 million in cash to U.S. Sugar Corp. It's the first completed purchase from U.S. Sugar in the state's two-year-old project to restore clean water flow through the Everglades. The land is a key parcel in protecting Florida's fresh water resources, according to Kirk Fordham, CEO of the Everglades Foundation, and essential in "rescuing the Everglades from decades of pollution."

The SFWMD opted to use cash for the deal, from a fund for future land acquisitions, rather than bonds, because of the declining economy, which has reduced the agency's operating revenues. Rather than take on future debt the agency decided to buy what it could outright. A legal case challenging whether bonds could be used for the purchase also threatened to slow down the transaction.

The 27,000 acres are part of 180,000 acres the SFWMD intends to purchase, according to Judy Sanchez U.S. Sugar spokeswoman. The district has a three-year option to buy at today's price — about \$7,350 an acre. After three years it will revert back to market price.

"This property, plus what the state owns and plans to acquire in the future, can ultimately provide the water storage and water treatment necessary to revive Lake Okeechobee, the coastal estuaries and the Florida Everglades and to ensure continued water supply to millions of South Florida residents," Sanchez said.

Florida finalizes Everglades deal with US Sugar

10/12/2010

[Return to Top](#)

Associated Press (AP) - Miami Bureau
Sedensky, Matt

A \$197 million attempt to restore the Everglades by turning over a swath of sugar farmland to the state was finalized Tuesday, ending two years of court battles and scaling back of the initial deal.

The South Florida Water Management District transferred all but about \$3 million of the funds to U.S. Sugar to complete the agreement for 26,791 acres. The balance was the company's contribution toward cleanup costs.

Though the deal is a fraction of the size initially planned when it was announced with fanfare in 2008 by Gov. Charlie Crist, environmentalists lauded the news.

The Everglades Foundation called it a "significant advancement." The Sierra Club said the move would "give future generations of Floridians a chance to enjoy the Everglades as it was before the 20th Century."

Crist said it puts Florida "one step closer to making our dreams of true restoration for the Everglades a reality."

Critics, including U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals, have derided the deal as a waste of taxpayer money.

The initial land purchase is about one-ninth the size that was originally planned. The state had planned to pay \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres, but the faltering economy led to repeated scale-backs.

"The economy threw them a wicked curve," said Judy Sanchez, a spokeswoman for U.S. Sugar.

The revised deal still gives the state the option to purchase the remainder of the land over the next decade.

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.



