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Eric Buermann: South Florida needs the Everglades deal

Eric Buermann
My View

There is no mistaking the groundswell of support for the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration. Leaders in national, state and local governments have publicly endorsed the acquisition, calling it, in the words of the secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, a "historic turning point for the largest watershed restoration project in the world."

Environmental groups, the watchdogs of restoration progress, have proclaimed this an important step forward, a "priceless, breathtaking opportunity." And newspapers from Miami to Pensacola, as well as others across the nation, agree with our view: that this is "fresh hope" — in the opinion of the *New York Times* — for protecting and restoring America's Everglades.

This makes the legal challenge by a small minority of interests who oppose the land acquisition a frustrating step along the path to progress. To be clear, their challenge does not oppose environmental improvements. It does not question the need for more water storage and treatment. Instead, the challengers are using the procedural step of court validation of the district's bonds for financing the acquisition as an attempt to simply block the deal.

Let me remind the naysayers where this land purchase will take us. Owning vast acreage south of Lake Okeechobee presents an unprecedented opportunity for water storage and treatment — the very backbone of restoration success. More reservoirs will mean fewer freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their fragile estuaries. More treatment marshes will improve delivery of cleaner water to the water conservation areas and Everglades National Park. And the practice of "backpumping" water into Lake Okeechobee will become a thing of the past.

These environmental benefits are important to South Florida's future, and we stand on the brink of acquiring the land to achieve them. At no other time in recent history — including when the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was developed in the 1990s — has acreage of this magnitude been made available to the public to serve our collective needs. Indeed, if such acreage had been available when CERP was being designed, the framework of projects for Everglades restoration would have turned out very differently.

In negotiating this exceptional purchase, we at the district have prudently modified the contract terms to reflect changing fiscal realities. We have identified key parcels for the initial acquisition. And we have moved steadily forward with a public planning process to put the best project ideas on the table. When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like this arises, it takes resolve to move forward, despite attempts by a vocal minority to throw down roadblocks. I can assure you that we see the vision. And we are resolved to build a healthier environment for South Florida. Now is the time to make this happen.

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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