

# **An epic opportunity for Everglades, if done right**

Palm Beach Post Letters to the Editor

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The South Florida Water Management District has an epic opportunity to restore the Everglades. To make this happen, the district needs to work to improve the terms of the \$1.34 billion contract to buy U.S. Sugar's land.

People around Lake Okeechobee must be treated fairly. According to consultants hired by the district, the land is \$400 million over market value. Why not create a trust fund to benefit the community, operated by a nonpolitical, independent board, with \$100 million or \$200 million to offset job losses directly related to the land purchase?

The land also needs to be cleaned up, so that it is ready for restoration. Restoration of the Everglades needs to begin now, not in seven or 10 years. The district needs to adopt a plan that supports the creation of connectivity and gravity flow from the lake to Everglades National Park. Sheet flow is the only way to truly relieve pressure on the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries. Because the district will not make definitive statements, the Palm Beach County Commission continues to make poor planning decisions, opening areas of critical concern to unnecessary and poorly planned development that will block flows to the south.

Also, Florida Crystals needs to be included now. Florida Crystals is willing to negotiate, and the district should negotiate the proper land swaps. Waiting will cause market dislocation and prevent the proper restoration of the Everglades.

The final issue is that the lease agreement undercuts existing land owners and creates market inequity. U.S. Sugar should not drive the negotiating process. The state has the power to drive a fair bargain for all parties. This is an epic opportunity, but it needs to be done right to truly save the Everglades.

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*Editor's note: Drew Martin is conservation chair, Loxahatchee Group, Sierra Club Lake Worth.*