

Search site

Search classifieds

Search Archives

Welcome **Guest**[Login](#) | [Register](#)


79
Current weather for
Marathon, FL[Click here for a Local
Weather Forecast](#)

— ADVERTISERS —

State should walk away from sugar deal

Posted - Wednesday, March 11, 2009 11:07 AM EDT

[E-Mail this story](#)[Print this story](#)

Talk about bad timing.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's much-ballyhooed plan to acquire 187,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land to expand Everglades recharge areas brought accolades last summer when the news first broke.

Now, nearly seven months later, the news isn't so good.

That's because Florida finds itself facing the worst economic downturn in modern history and spending \$1.34 billion to buy out U.S. Sugar is coming under increasing fire up in Tallahassee.

The headline in Tuesday's Miami Herald was pretty blunt: "Tax dip may sour sugar deal."

State economists are warning that early estimates of the state's revenue shortfall, issued in early January, are already looking overly optimistic.

And just in case you weren't paying attention, it's not Crist or the Legislature footing the bill for this proposed U.S. Sugar deal. Nope, it's the property owners in Monroe County and the adjoining 15 other South Florida counties that are part of the South Florida Water Management District.

Therein lies the rub.

The tax base for real property in those 16 counties has fallen since the governor and his negotiating team first sat down with U.S. Sugar.

Based on current projections, tax revenue for the district would drop 14 percent this year, which means the ability of the district to borrow and then pay off the huge debt becomes much more compromised.

Shannon Estenoz, vice chairwoman of the district's governing board, was quoted in the Herald as saying "there is irony about this. It's the best land to buy at the worst possible time."

Well, there's even growing debate about if this really is the "best land to buy."

That's because the important effort to clean up the Everglades relies on restoring wetlands and recharge areas to reduce the awful impact of agricultural pollutants on water flowing into the Everglades.

The U.S. Sugar purchase actually involves more land than can readily be used for that purpose, and gaps in the parcels that lie between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

So that means swapping out some land or buying more to make this work. And that further jeopardizes all the existing water cleanup programs the district has underway.

Caution and common sense argue for the district to opt out of the deal before it's too late. They have until Sept. 1 to either sign or walk away. It's prudent to walk away.

ADVERTISEMENTS