

Editorial: 'Restoration reserve' another reason for Florida to acquire U.S. Sugar land

By TCPalm Staff

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Imagine an Everglades ecosystem that is not just environmentally friendly, but also *user-friendly*.

This is the vision being articulated by Karl Wickstrom.

It's a concept that merits far greater attention than it has received.

Wickstrom is the founder of Stuart-based Florida Sportsman magazine and one of the leaders of the Rivers Coalition, a group formed to protect and restore the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon. Like the vast majority of the Florida's environmentalists, Wickstrom quickly threw his support behind the state's proposed purchase of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

In December, the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District voted 4-3 to approve the \$1.34 billion acquisition. Under the agreement, U.S. Sugar would lease back the land from the state — and continue farming it — for seven years.

State officials currently are grappling with several issues, including the cost of the acquisition and pollution standards while the land remains under U.S. Sugar's control.

The environmental benefits of re-establishing a natural flow-way from Lake Okeechobee through the River of Grass to Florida Bay — with the U.S. Sugar deal being part of the plan — would be enormous. These include:

- Saving the estuaries from destructive discharges.
- Eliminating hundreds of tons of phosphorous fertilizer pollution.
- Recharging ground-water systems.

Wickstrom has elevated the discussion by giving state officials another compelling reason to consummate the deal. He has proposed a "restoration reserve" — a sprawling, natural resource that "would attract birders from throughout our country and from all over the world. It would have some of the best kayaking trails in Florida, as well as some of the best freshwater fishing."

The infrastructure to support these recreational activities — lodging, restaurants, guides, kayak rentals and so on — would generate revenues for the reserve. It also would provide much-needed employment in local communities that will be adversely affected by the loss of jobs associated with the sugar industry.

A recent poll conducted by the Florida Chamber of Commerce found that two-thirds — 66 percent — of 600 respondents support the proposed deal with U.S. Sugar.

State officials need to make sure they obtain the land necessary to make the flow-way possible.

In addition to the enormous environmental benefits, Florida has the opportunity to create a world-class natural resource that will be "experienced" by present and future generations.



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