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South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

Now that there's a new deal, can we get on with the Everglades restoration?

THE ISSUE: Everglades land deal is scaled down.

April 6, 2009

The new deal to buy land to help restore the Everglades may not stem controversy, but it should spur state leaders to finally get on with completing one of Florida's more important public works projects.

For \$533 million, the state will purchase 72,500 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. property. It's a huge reduction from the previous — and now clearly unaffordable — \$1.7 billion bid of the sugar manufacturer and all of its assets. The new deal leaves U.S. Sugar operating on more than 100,000 acres of property, and the state with an option to buy more acreage in the future.

The state and Everglades proponents may not get all they wanted in this slimmed down deal. Storing water, as envisioned in a best-case restoration plan, will need more than 72,500 acres. Questions remain about mining operations and the need to buy land from Florida Crystals, a longtime competitor of U.S. Sugar and an opponent of the current deal.

Still, South Florida Water Management District officials should approve the deal in the interest of moving forward efforts to restore the Florida Everglades.

Delays have not helped this multi-faceted project. Whether it's a lawsuit by a disgruntled party or a presidential veto, time is now the enemy of this historic initiative that began with what sounds like a bargain \$8 billion.

The current agreement gives the state enough land to stake out a considerable and credible toehold to restore water flowing south of Lake Okeechobee. There's enough land to build new surface water storage facilities, something the state has lacked.

More importantly, the deal leaves water managers with enough resources to address other key facets of Everglades restoration, including the badly needed clean-up of polluted water being dumped into the Kissimmee River from farms north of Lake Okeechobee.

Restoring the Florida Everglades will ensure a cleaner natural habitat for flora and fauna, and provide ample water for the region's human occupants as well. The agreement with U.S. Sugar now before water managers remains an important step toward turning that larger goal into a reality.

BOTTOM LINE: Approve the new deal.

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