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An offer that's hard to refuse

Buying U.S. Sugar is a chance to undo years of damage to the Everglades



The natural flow of the Everglades has been blocked for decades by farming and development, which also have polluted the wetlands with fertilizer-laden runoff. AP PHOTO / 2005

The land would help restore the natural flow of the Everglades from Lake Okeechobee south to Florida Bay. That flow has been blocked for decades by farming and development, which also have polluted the wetlands with fertilizer-laden runoff and other contaminants.

If an agreement is reached, the acquisitions will accelerate a moribund Everglades restoration program, which has been stalled by a lack of land and a shortage of funding by the state and Congress. It will reduce the cost of the \$10 billion program by providing land for water storage, rendering moot original plans to create hundreds of expensive underground wells.

Gulf coast would benefit

The deal would also help solve a problem with pollution from Lake Okeechobee. The lake now collects water tainted with fertilizer and manure runoff from agricultural lands to the north; when the lake's level gets too high in the rainy season, water is released eastward via the St. Lucie River and westward via the Caloosahatchee River. As a result the rivers' estuaries are fouled, and the

The deal, as the participants say, is monumental. It is also expensive, complicated and still under construction. But the proposal that the state buy out U.S. Sugar Corp. to help restore the Everglades is simply too good to pass up.

The \$1.75 billion plan, formally announced Tuesday by Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar officials, would provide the state with 187,000 acres -- roughly 300 square miles -- in the heart of the Everglades.

Caloosahatchee's pollution has been cited as feeding red tide in the Gulf.

The U.S. Sugar land might enable the lake's overflow, once cleaned, to be released into the Everglades.

How to clean the Okeechobee overflow is only one of the questions surrounding the U.S. Sugar deal, and it is far from the most pressing.

Some of the more basic questions are:

Is \$1.75 billion a fair price? The state will have its own appraisal done.

How would the state pay for the purchase? The Legislature struggled this year to fill a \$2 billion gap in state revenues, necessitating cuts in school funding and other essentials. And Florida's tax-generating economy is not expected to improve substantially any time soon.

What becomes of U.S. Sugar's 1,700 employees and the South Florida cities like Clewiston whose existence is tied to cane farming?

What effect would the massive acquisition -- more than double the 73,000 acres that the state purchased in the Babcock Ranch deal -- have on the state's sensitive-lands buying program?

There is time for those questions to be answered and for other problems to be resolved. Negotiations between the state and U.S. Sugar will continue, with an eye toward closing the deal in September. If an agreement is reached, U.S. Sugar would continue its operations for at least six years before turning over its land and other assets to the state.

What is clear now is that, in acquiring U.S. Sugar, the state would eventually remove a business that historically has been a major source of the Everglades' pollution and a beneficiary of ill-advised federal price supports.

More important, the state has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to undo much of the damage inflicted on the Everglades and other critical elements of Florida's environment. As costly and complicated as this deal is, Florida can't afford to say no.
