

## Editorial: A sweet deal

By Staff Reports

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Now that more details are available, Gov. Charlie Crist's surprise plan to buy U.S. Sugar and its 187,000 acres of cane fields south of Lake Okeechobee can be summed up in one word:

"Excellent."

The unprecedented \$1.75 billion land buy changes the whole complexion of Florida's dream to restore the Everglades to some semblance of its natural self.

In 1999, the state and federal governments unveiled a 30-year plan. It called for \$8.4 billion (it's now somewhere around \$11 billion in 2008 dollars) to pay for more than 50 separate projects in Collier, Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties that would restore the flow of water needed to help the Everglades achieve a measure of health.

The plan has been moving at snail's pace, but it still calls for water preserve areas to be established, deep wells to be drilled to hold excess water, pumps to be installed to overcome man-made obstacles to natural water flow and entire canal systems to be re-engineered.

In some respects, it is an expensive Band-Aid. If the Everglades is really to be saved, something more is needed. Wednesday's announcement that U.S. Sugar would be willing to sell its holdings south of Lake Okeechobee is the start of something more.

During the rainy season, billions of gallons of water must be kept off the cane fields around Clewiston. When the excess water is allowed to take its natural course and flow south into the Big Cypress Swamp to the Everglades, phosphorus and other byproducts of the sugar cane industry take a toll, killing natural vegetation and upsetting the ecosystem's balance. The runoff has even been linked to poor water quality in Florida Bay and off the Florida Keys.

When the excess water is allowed to be pumped from the fields back into Lake Okeechobee, other environmental disasters occur. The phosphorus-laden water sparks algae blooms, all but killing sections of the lake and forcing the release of nutrient-rich water into the Caloosahatchee River. That's the water that has been suspected in outbreaks of "red tide" and "black water" off

the beaches of Lee and Collier counties.

For cane growers, it's been damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't. They've been seeking political, legal and scientific solutions to no avail.

Buying and phasing out U.S. Sugar — the buyout plan allows sugar to be grown for six more years — will solve the growers' dilemma.

While the immediate cessation of cane growing would be preferred, the six-year grace period is essential for the thousands of people who live along the southwest rim of Lake Okeechobee. Sugar has fueled Clewiston and neighboring towns and hamlets. It would be unfair to make those communities go cold turkey.

As for the price, \$1.75 billion is a big number that will be borne by property owners in Collier, Lee and other counties forming the South Florida Water Management District. The dollar amount won't look as big if some of the money pledged to the 1999 plan can be used. For example, there is \$1.16 billion in the initial Everglades plan for digging 200 deep-injection wells along Lake Okeechobee to store water that floods agriculture fields. How much of that money can be redirected to the U.S. Sugar purchase is among the questions that still need to be answered.

Regardless, \$1.75 billion to shut down sugar production will be money well spent and, in the long run, a cheap price to pay in helping solve a laundry list of ecological problems, ranging from algae blooms in Florida Bay to black water in the Gulf to dying coral reefs off the keys.

Excellent.

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