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Crist Shows Vision, Good Sense With Ambitious Everglades Deal

The Tampa Tribune

Published: June 25, 2008

For all his nice-guy, never-say-a-mean-word ways, Gov. Charlie Crist has managed to do what no other Florida governor has dared to attempt.

He is sending Big Sugar packing from Florida and putting a plug on agricultural operations that have steadily polluted the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and coastal waters.

And he did it in a way that leaves the industry's biggest player whole.

Because of a deal initiated by Crist, the state will buy out U.S. Sugar and use most of its 187,000 acres to restore natural water flow to the River of Grass.

The tract is Florida's biggest land purchase, by far. It measures 292 square miles and stretches across three counties. The company says the acreage is three times the size of Orlando.

The \$1.75 billion deal needs close scrutiny, of course, but this purchase looks to be a remarkable accomplishment for Crist, one that will help repair the Everglades and protect south Florida's water supply. It requires no tax increases, since it will be funded by a bond-like mechanism repaid by property taxes levied by the South Florida Water Management District, which oversees water policies in 16 counties. The district is Florida's lead agency on the \$8 billion Everglades restoration project, a state-federal venture.

South Florida's financial commitment deserves matching support from Washington, which has been sluggish in providing its share of restoration funds. With this purchase, the repair work becomes less complicated and the outlook for quick results far brighter.

While other Florida governors have championed the Everglades' revival, none has been successful in challenging the politically powerful sugar industry, which a few years back even managed to persuade state lawmakers to lower water-quality standards in the Everglades.

The low-key Crist did what others could not.

The time was right for negotiations. U.S. Sugar faced the need to upgrade aging mills. The water district began prohibiting the back-pumping of polluted runoff into Lake Okeechobee. And Washington subsidies have become increasingly hard to get.

It helped, too, that U.S. Sugar has tried to be a good corporate citizen and is cooperating with the clean-up efforts.

The deal calls for the state to purchase the company's assets, though farming operations will continue for at least six years. Much of the tract borders Lake Okeechobee, whose overflow once fed the Everglades. Now the lake is diked and heavily polluted by agricultural operations.

The state may swap a few outlying parcels for more environmentally valuable land, but it expects to use the bulk for restoration work, including the construction of reservoirs that can store and filter water before release.

No deal comes without a downside, though. Roughly 1,700 U.S. Sugar employees will eventually lose their jobs. And Clewiston, where the company is based, will have to adjust to no longer being "America's Sweetest Town." Affected communities will need assistance during the transition.

Still, the restoration work will create thousands of jobs. And cleaning Okeechobee and the Everglades should dramatically enhance the appeal of lakefront communities.


No legislation apparently is needed to complete the deal, just the approval of the water-district board after appraisals are completed and details scrutinized.

Gov. Crist often says he has gained inspiration from President Theodore Roosevelt, who fought to preserve American wilderness for future generations.

With this visionary but sensible conservation deal, Crist has done Roosevelt and the people of Florida proud.

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