

EDITORIAL Restoring Florida Transfer of land tract, sugar company to state will help revive

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Jul. 26--Through the years, development and agriculture have stanchd the flow of Florida's "River of Grass," reducing the scope of the Everglades, one of the richest ecosystems in the world. Now, in an amazing turn of events, the potential sale of the nation's largest sugar company to the state of Florida promises to begin undoing much of the damage.

One only can wonder at the extent of negotiations that brought Florida Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar Corp. Chief Executive Office Robert H. Buker Jr. to stand together on a hot summer day late last month and outline a plan to return about 300 square miles of sugar-cane fields to nature. The deal would spell the end of a 77-year-old corporation whose name brings to mind an entire industry, rather than a single entity.

The men unveiled the agreement while standing on a levee, backed by a view of the wetlands of the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge. Remarkably, nearly everyone outside their immediate circles -- from the employees and towns dependent on the sugar business to environmental groups that for years have pushed for Everglades restoration -- was taken by surprise.

Perhaps that same sort of surprise greeted company lobbyists when Crist met with them in November to talk about environmental and regulatory concerns, among other issues. According to U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert E. Coker, the governor at one point said, "Why don't we just buy you out?" The idea was so jarring that Coker said when he learned of it, "I just about passed out."

In the ensuing months, any discussions that led to Florida's offer of \$1.75 billion were kept under close wraps. The state is to take over the cane fields and various other assets, including a sugar refinery and more than 30,000 acres of orange groves. The deal is to be finalized on Nov. 30.

Amid all the cheering by environmental groups, one serious dissent arose in the form of a lawsuit filed this month by the Miccosukee Indian tribe in U.S. District Court in Miami. The tribe seeks guarantees that a water reservoir already under construction will be completed. The project is aimed at protecting reservation land, which is within Everglades National Park, from agricultural and urban runoff.

The Everglades once covered a vast area over the southern half of Florida, stretching from near Orlando along the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee and onward into bays of the Atlantic Ocean on both sides of the Florida Peninsula. In the past century, about 50 percent of these wetlands were destroyed for agriculture and urban development.

Allowing U.S. Sugar lands to return to their natural state would be a big step toward

restoration of the historic flow of the River of Grass and the ecosystem that depends upon it.

The American sugar industry remains politically pampered. The new farm bill, passed in May over President Bush's veto, provides the price supports and tariffs on imported sugar that help protect it from foreign competition.

U.S. policies ensure sugar prices on the American market stay at about 21 cents per pound vs. a world-market price of about 12 cents per pound. The Government Accountability Office estimates that this handout to the industry costs consumers \$1.9 billion.

Few analysts, however, expect the Florida-U.S. Sugar deal, which envisions a six-year phased demise of the company, to reduce the industry's clout. If it does, the buyout could prove to be a boon not only to Florida's environment but also to American consumers, who would benefit from lower prices on their favorite sweetener.

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