

Editorial: Don't let delays hurt Everglades

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Word of delay in the state's planned purchase of U.S. Sugar's assets in the Everglades is troubling for a couple of reasons.

The deal was supposed to be done by November; now it's "sometime in 2009."

Any further delay in the already bogged down Everglades restoration project is frustrating in itself. In Lee County, we are eager for this sale to be inked because it could lead to the long-sought diversion of polluted Lake Okeechobee water south, away from the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary.

The cost of Everglades restoration has escalated seriously over the past 10 years, and promised federal participation has lagged. Problems over details in the U.S. Sugar sale may compound those difficulties.

Second worry: The South Florida Water Management District is said to be looking for ways to defray the huge \$1.75 billion cost of the land deal by selling off some of the sugar company's assets or by seeking partners in the purchase.

Some of that sort of thing makes sense, but nothing should be allowed to change the top priority, which is the environment.

Restoring the Everglades and protecting the Caloosahatchee may not require ending sugar production on all U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres. There should be room for continuing agriculture and for other kinds of economic development in the region, which stands to lose hundreds of farm jobs. But this should not be an opening for urban sprawl or industrial development.

Everglades restoration was deeply flawed from the beginning precisely because inadequate land was being bought south of the lake. Don't blow this chance to fix that flaw.

The first priority must remain creating the southern flowway for lake water. That will send much more of it back the way nature intended it to run, instead of dumping it in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers to devastate west- and east-coast coastal waters as it did in 2004 and 2005.

And it would be a shame to pass up the chance to create a vast new network of preservation lands where agriculture was so unwisely planted.