

## Hopeful in Big Sugar land deal

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While some environmental groups are hailing the pending state purchase of massive tracts of U.S. Sugar farmland to help restore natural water flow in the Everglades, it is too soon to label this a sweet deal for Florida.

Certainly, it is promising. But until the public has had a chance to review the final agreement, scheduled for approval Dec. 8, too many questions remain whose answers could as readily turn up hollow cane at a bitter price.

As originally announced in June by Gov. Charlie Crist, the deal would entail the state buying 187,000 acres (encompassing nearly half the sugar cane fields in the Everglades Agricultural Area south of Lake Okeechobee) for \$1.75 billion and perhaps negotiating land swaps with other sugar growers in the area to effect the best water sheet flow through the River of Grass. U.S. Sugar would lease back the land for six years while it phased out its business and then pay to help with cleanup of agricultural pollutants.

Now, the company says it wants to stay in business by partnering with an Illinois firm to build a plant in Clewiston to process sugar cane for 100 million gallons of ethanol per year. That 'green energy' initiative brightens the sugar company's previously dim business prospects and could prevent an unemployment nightmare for a local population almost entirely dependent on Big Sugar and for which the state thus far has offered little promise of livelihood after the land buy.

The ethanol plan also means the sugar company would hang onto assets -- a rail line, citrus processing plant and sugar mill -- previously included in the land sale. Taxpayers would save about \$350 million off the initial price, welcome news to a Legislature strapped for cash.

Still, taxpayers deserve to know what their \$1.4 billion outlay would accomplish toward restoring the Everglades, how the state intends to manage the land and hydrology, and whether the huge purchase will jeopardize other projects critical to the restoration. For that matter, they should be assured the state will pay no more than fair market value for the land.

This is particularly important in light of several factors continuing to disrupt the restoration. For instance, Florida Crystals, another sugar company, is seeking an inland port in the path of water that would flow across the U.S. Sugar land. That could threaten any simple land swap with the state. Palm Beach County has been pushing for rock mines in the water's path.

Meanwhile, an environmental coalition sued to prevent discharges of dirty lake water and farm runoff into coastal rivers and estuaries. Certainly, the practice should stop, but where would that water be diverted if the state doesn't acquire the sugar land?

Staring down an additional \$2.14 billion general revenue shortfall, the state can't afford to get this deal wrong. Taxpayers can get behind it if Crist can assure them of a fair price and reasonably good outcomes for the Everglades' long-term vitality. They need answers and sufficient time to scrutinize a final agreement before the state commits to it.