

Everglades Cleanup First Benefits U.S. Sugar

Tallahassee Democrat

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Next week the South Florida Water Management District is expected to vote on a contract that on the surface is intended to ultimately clean up Florida's wondrous Everglades. But beneath murky waters, the deal appears to be an overly generous buyout for U.S. Sugar, which has been losing money and has incurred enormous new debt.

If a proposed \$1.34 billion purchase of U.S. Sugar's 182,500 acres goes forward on Monday or Tuesday — and despite the fact that the water district needs just 40,000 to 45,000 of those acres for Everglades restoration — U.S. Sugar would lease the land back for the bargain price of \$50 an acre for six of a seven year contract. That's about one-fifth of market rate; hence, not much of a deal in lease payments for taxpayers.

During those years, systems for converting the farm land into water storage and filtration areas would be completed. And that's the part of the purchase plan that's critically important to environmentalists and the ecosystem south of the Everglades and vital to South Florida.

Yet given the current economic climate, and not knowing how much this restoration would ultimately cost — given long-term costs of bond financing on top of the \$1.34 billion purchase — a decision next week is dubious, rushed and arbitrary. To proceed with this approach, the district will also have to divert funding intended for other Everglades restoration projects.

The Miami-Dade legislative delegation, in whose backyard all this would take place, last week called upon the water management district to back off for the time being until a much fuller understanding of the situation can be aired.

"We are in the midst of one of the most severe economic recessions in the history of our region, our state and our Nation," Rep. Juan Zapata, R-Miami, wrote Chairman Eric Buermann, explaining the near panic of constituents over the losses in myriad services and needs that will go unmet due to the revenue shortfalls.

"Yet your agency, through an unelected board, is preparing to spend \$1.34 billion on land for what appears to be nothing more than a corporate bailout," he wrote, requesting an immediate and full briefing before the Miami-Dade as well as the Broward delegations before any contracts are signed.

Land beyond the U.S. Sugar property will also have to be purchased for the restoration and there is no clear plan for where that money would come from.

Nor is the water district sure what it would do with all the land it is contracting to buy from U.S. Sugar, but which isn't needed for the restoration. Some talk exists of trading some of the land with Florida Crystals to acquire the land still needed for the restoration project.

The concerns of the South Florida delegation, coupled with vote last week by the Florida Farm Bureau Federation to oppose the plan — should concern all Floridians. That includes those of us in North Florida who also have a stake in the outcome with so many of our state tax dollars already invested in the Everglades and previous restoration attempts.

Most Floridians no doubt support continuing efforts to clean up the Everglades ecosystem. But all parties need to go back to the negotiating table until more certainty and clarity can be gained in this hugely expensive and vastly complex project.

Gov. Charlie Crist has expressed overall support for Everglades restoration, which started as the Everglades Forever Act of 1994. But he needs to re-enter the discussion to ensure a sounder, smarter deal for all. Elected leaders, not an appointed board, need to make sure that this historic deal does not go down in history as, above all, a bailout for U.S. Sugar rather than a rescue of vital natural resources.