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Fresh Hope for the Everglades

People who care about the Everglades have had little to cheer about over the last eight years. An \$11 billion federal-state plan signed by President Bill Clinton in 2000 to rescue this once vibrant ecosystem has made almost no progress, not least because Washington has failed to keep its part of what was supposed to be a 50-50 deal.

Even so, those attending this week's annual meeting in Miami of the Everglades Coalition — the group of activists and political leaders who have led the restoration fight for the last quarter-century — found two very good reasons for optimism. A Florida state agency has approved Gov. Charlie Crist's audacious plan to buy and retire from production 180,000 acres of sugar cane fields near Lake Okeechobee. The \$1.34 billion deal would eliminate a major source of phosphorous pollution and provide room for huge reservoirs to store water that could later be released to the Everglades during the dry season — a critical point in any ecosystem's lifecycle.

The bigger reason for optimism — bigger than any single project or group of projects could ever be — is the change in leadership in Washington. President-elect Barack Obama pledged to help the Everglades during his campaign, and his top adviser on environmental matters, Carol Browner, has long been a fierce advocate for the Everglades.

Ms. Browner grew up in Florida and — first as a state official, later as administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency — she fought the sugar barons and developers whose thirst for water and land has impoverished Florida's natural environment. She also has experience dealing with the notoriously dysfunctional Army Corps of Engineers, which is charged with reconstructing the spider web of canals and levees that impede freshwater flows into the Everglades.

Everglades restoration is a project that does not get done unless somebody powerful wants it done. Former Vice President Al Gore wanted it done, as did the former interior secretary, Bruce Babbitt. Mr. Bush and his team did not champion it. As a result, Congress

has contributed only about \$500 million to a project on which Florida, with far fewer resources, has contributed \$2.5 billion.

Ms. Browner has a lot on her mind these days, but reviving this noble initiative should remain on her radar. It deserves Washington's full support.

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