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Tell public why regulators criticized U.S. Sugar price

Palm Beach Post Editorial

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Gov. Crist's administration has a tougher job to sell the public, and perhaps the Legislature, on the U.S. Sugar deal.

A story by Paul Quinlan in last Monday's *Post* shows that members of the Crist administration used a legal maneuver to silence concerns over the \$1.34 billion price. This newspaper has noted the conflict of Gov. Crist's Department of Environmental Protection secretary, Michael Sole, leading negotiations with U.S. Sugar even though the South Florida Water Management District is paying for the land. Now we know that DEP officials at the top dismissed concerns of DEP officials at the bottom.

U.S. Sugar deal



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As Mr. Quinlan reported, after reviewing thousands of internal e-mails, DEP appraisers would not sign off on water district appraisals two weeks before the district board's Dec. 16 vote to approve the contract. Rather than delay the vote, or let those concerns be aired, negotiators led by Mr. Sole deleted a clause in the sales contract that required the DEP appraisers to sign off.

The district may pay for that mistake in Tallahassee, where legislators seem far too eager to oppose a land buy that not only could save the Everglades but bolster South Florida's water supply. Unfortunately, the attacks on the U.S. Sugar deal appear to be motivated less by concern over spending than by lobbyists looking to disrupt the sale.

Lining up against the deal are: a rival grower, Florida Crystals; a competing bidder, The Lawrence Group; and the Miccosukee Tribe, which fears that the deal will stop ongoing projects that benefit the tribe. If Gov. Crist wanted to thwart the lobbyists, he could remove DEP's role entirely. But if he insists on DEP continuing, the agency needs to explain what its appraisers found. District board members left themselves an out on the deal. If the price would be too much of a financial strain, the district can back out before closing in September. If that happened, would U.S. Sugar accept less money to save the deal?

Eric Buermann, chairman of the water district governing board, acknowledges the high price but says that it's worth paying. A grower buying farmland in a business

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deal, Mr. Buermann says, can look elsewhere - out of state, for instance. But the district can't go somewhere else to find the huge amount of land it needs to store water to keep the Everglades wet during dry times.

Decades from now, Mr. Buermann says, the cost will be forgotten. Failure to act, he says, would prove more costly, through lost water supply and habitat. "If we don't do something to take this initial step, in the next 50 years you're going to have some real problems. What are people going to say, looking back on us: 'We didn't do anything?' ... Maybe it's not the best price but the issue is, Are you taking this first step?"

He's right about the potential. He's wrong on the logic, which leads to the conclusion that the district would pay anything. That's hardly a strong negotiating posture, and now there is new support - from Mr. Quinlan's story- for the idea that the price is too high.

Gov. Crist could dismiss the Legislature's complaints, many of which reveal an ignorance of the issue and the Everglades, as well as influence by lobbyists. But the governor would do better to undo the damage caused by the silencing of DEP's appraisers. Otherwise, the Legislature could respond by restricting the use of the bonds with which the water district intends to finance the sale. A not-done deal still could be done in.

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