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Editorial: Don't let sugar get away

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Florida could blow a historic opportunity to repair grievous damage to its environment, damage that threatens Southwest Florida's economy.

That's if the state does not move aggressively to close its deal on 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. crop land in the Everglades.

A purchase contract has been negotiated and a sweet offer made by the state, \$1.34 billion. But despite the expiration of a 60-day period the company had to entertain other bids and could seek them out, U.S. Sugar is still free to entertain unsolicited bids so long as the state doesn't have its financing for the purchase secured.

That puts the pressure on the state to get things wrapped up quickly before the land is bought — or acquired through hostile takeover — by other agribusinesses who may or may not be amenable to selling enough land at the right price to make Everglades restoration possible.

The deal was supposed to be as good as done when it was announced last year. The state would buy U.S. Sugar's crop land and other assets in the Everglades Agricultural area south and east of Lake Okeechobee. Some land would eventually be used or swapped for land to create a southern flow way for excess lake water released in years of high water.

That would allow storing and filtering of the excess water, instead of its release in huge gobs west into the Caloosahatchee River. Laden with agricultural nutrients, that water has caused devastating algae blooms in the Caloosahatchee in recent years and upset the salinity that makes Lee County's coastal estuary a multi-billion-dollar asset for fishing and tourism.

At least two other agribusinesses are interested in the assets of U.S. Sugar. Both say they would work with the state to make land available for restoration. But that's a gamble we can't afford to take.

Our leaders in Tallahassee need to hear from us that we want the U.S. Sugar deal clinched, because it will be good for our environment and economy.

We're talking about the chance to reverse pollution and water conservation mistakes that have piled up for well over a century in South Florida.

We may never get this chance again.

Additional Facts

CONTACT THEM

- Sen. Garrett Richter, District 37, 338-2777 in Lee or 417-6205 in Collier
- Sen. Dave Aronberg, District 27, 338-2646

- Sen. Mike Bennett, District 21, 225-3697
 - Rep. Ken Roberson, House District 71, 941-613-0914
 - Rep. Paige Kreegel, House District 72, 941-575-5820
 - Rep. Nick Thompson, House District 73, 533-2411
 - Rep. Gary Aubuchon,
House District 74, 344-4900
 - Rep. Trudi Williams, District 75, 433-6775
 - Gov. Charlie Crist 850-488-4441
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