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Sweeter Glades deal

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The state of Florida has addressed the most troubling aspects of its deal to buy U.S. Sugar land to replumb the Everglades. The proposal, unveiled Wednesday, is fairer to taxpayers and more affordable. And it balances phasing in Everglades restoration while phasing out the agricultural operations that pollute Florida's River of Grass. After three tries, Gov. Charlie Crist has a proposal that offers both fiscal sense and a road map for moving ahead.

Under the new offer, the state would pay \$533 million to buy 72,500 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields from U.S. Sugar. About half the land, currently used for citrus production, would be available to the state within a year. U.S. Sugar would lease back 40,000 acres of sugarcane land for at least seven years. Within the first 10 years, the state could buy the remaining 107,500 acres it originally sought. It also would retain the right of first refusal should another party offer to buy the property.

The new proposal does not provide the state an opportunity to replumb the Everglades in a single swoop. But that was not going to happen anyway, even before the recession took hold. The footprint now is big enough to begin a restoration effort that inevitably will take decades to complete. By shaving two-thirds off the initial purchase price, the state accomplishes two things: It allows for phasing in restoration projects as they are designed and funds become available, and it makes it likelier that the agency in charge, the South Florida Water Management District, will be able to undertake the massive effort without compromising its core mission of managing water resources across South Florida.

The terms are also better. The new deal would triple the \$50-an-acre rate that U.S. Sugar would pay to lease the land until restoration begins. It also removes a clause that gave U.S. Sugar the seventh year of its lease rent-free. U.S. Sugar has agreed not to sell its land closest to Lake Okeechobee for the next three years. That provision buys the state time for the economy to recover and to buy additional land if the price is right.

The water district's governing board, which is scheduled to take up the proposal Thursday, still has questions to answer. It needs to confirm the assessment by its executive director, Carol Wehle, that taxpayers in the 16-county district can afford the purchase even if the recession continues to depress property tax collections for another couple years. The board needs to assure the public that it can manage both the restoration and its larger obligations. There should also be a timetable for acquiring the additional lands. After all, the whole point is to piece together a footprint that is large and integrated enough to restore some natural flow to the South Florida ecosystem. Now that it has more time, the state also needs to help Okeechobee basin communities craft a strategy to sustain jobs and the tax base once farming ends.

The current deal, too, has an escape clause if the financing does not add up for the district. Board members should realize by now, with this third iteration, that deadlines to close the deal are less important than getting it right. They need to reassure an understandably skeptical public — the same public that realizes it's cleaning up pollution from an industry propped up by federal price supports — that the terms are fair. But the state is working from a better starting point. Now it is time to vet the details.