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Pruning 'Glades deal

The Tampa Tribune

It may be a blessing that the eroding economy claimed Gov. Charlie Crist's ambitious plan to buy 180,000 acres for Everglades' restoration.

Many details about the deal to pay U.S. Sugar \$1.75 billion for the land were questionable. It was not clear the state needed that much acreage and its agreement to lease the farmland back to U.S. Sugar for seven years at bargain-basement prices made many suspect this was more a sweetheart deal for the sugar company than a historic environmental feat.

Now Crist has come back with a less ambitious arrangement that is also less worrisome. The state would buy only 72,500 acres for \$533 million. The lesser amount should allow the South Florida Water Management District to fund the acquisition without raising property taxes. The original proposal called for tax rates to remain the same, but falling property values made that impossible.

The state will lease about 40,000 acres to U.S. Sugar for seven years, but the company would pay \$150 an acre, not the suspicious \$50-an-acre called for in the first plan.

The 72,500 acres won't be enough, but it is plenty for the state to begin serious and meaningful restoration work.