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## EDITORIAL: Back on Everglades track

Palm Beach Post Editorial

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When it comes to restoring the Everglades, an agreement on science may be only as good as an agreement on finances.

For years, Florida and the federal government had agreed on the science. They agreed to split the cost of restoring the Everglades, now estimated to be a \$10.9 billion project. But they had not agreed on how to account for who pays what. Last month, the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District was shocked to learn that a pending agreement had been dynamited by "another set of eyes," required by bureaucrats in Washington.



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Fortunately, head-to-head meetings over two days resolved issues that could have sunk eight years of preparation. Last week, the district and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced that they officially have worked out their differences.

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The cooperation is especially timely, because for the first time in years Congress has agreed to uphold its end of the financial bargain and send money toward the Everglades. The paper differences could have delayed \$41 million toward the \$438 million Picayune Strand project in Collier County.

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This month marks another milestone in state-federal relations: Lake Okeechobee is getting better. The corps manages the lake level, with input from the district. In recent years, it has been hard to get the level right. Too much water from the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005 led to higher lake levels, damaging fishing and stressing the Herbert Hoover Dike. That resulted in a \$980 million plan to strengthen the dike. Too little water during the drought of 2007-08 resulted in a record-low level, and a lake bottom so parched that arsonists were able to torch it.

Entering the peak of this year's hurricane season, the lake levels appear to be just right. One mark of improvement, as *The Post's* Paul Quinlan reported Sunday, is the healthier size of the winning catch in a recent bass fishing tournament. What's good for the lake could be good for the economy of the lake communities, where unemployment is as high as 42 percent in South Bay. Fishing means tourism, and tourism means jobs.

All this good, of course, can be undone by one wet hurricane. To relieve pressure on the dike if the levels rise,



water managers would have to dump polluted lake water into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, harming delicate estuaries.

That's where the district's proposed \$536 million purchase of U.S. Sugar land comes in. Buy that land and more water can go south, giving lake managers new options. The cooperation levels are good between federal and state water managers, but they can get better. How they incorporate the U.S. Sugar deal into existing agreements is the next test.

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