



August 18, 2009

Gaston Cantens: U.S. Sugar deal is bad for the Everglades

Gaston Cantens
My View

Re: "South Florida needs the Everglades deal" (My View, Aug. 12).

Most Floridians are unaware of what a dicey and dramatic departure the U.S. Sugar land purchase is from the science-based policies and restoration programs we had been pursuing in the Everglades. The government's purchase of U.S. Sugar's lands near Lake Okeechoobee creates a hazy, undetailed new course of action, or lack thereof, for restoration of the Everglades.

As the first Everglades Agricultural Area farmer to sign off on the historic Everglades Settlement Agreement nearly 15 years ago, Florida Crystals has wholeheartedly supported restoration; we recognize it is crucial to the long-term survival of South Florida's sustainable agriculture.

As an advocate for the construction of Everglades projects, we feel compelled to draw attention to the gross misuse of more than \$500 million of public funds by the water management district and underscore what a departure this is from the Everglades restoration plan the state and federal governments and all other interested stakeholders, including farmers, have been working toward for more than a decade. The proposed U.S. Sugar deal is a roadblock to the construction of projects that would have meaningful restoration results. In fact, a massive project that was under way was canceled because of this deal.

Experts associated with the effort have admitted that after, incurring the purchase debt, they will have no financial ability to do anything with the land. Water management district officials tout their "vision" of water supply and quality resulting from this purchase, but the district's executive director has admitted none of these benefits will flow naturally from the purchase. All require construction, operation and maintenance of massive public projects that the district has no ability to undertake. These projects would cost between \$14 billion and \$17 billion to build and \$387 million to \$452 million annually to operate. The district has no plan to approach paying for this. In a time of economic strife, the public will needlessly have \$550 million to \$650 million more to pay (after issuance costs), and U.S. Sugar will continue to farm the land it "sold." This land buy will merely cancel projects that could provide meaningful restoration

We urge the district to go back to crafting a realistic and fiscally prudent plan that can actually be implemented and provide real benefits like the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan from which they have deviated.

All Floridians — along with the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee — deserve to see measurable, finite progress on real restoration. Current "visions" are as fallow and inert as the land the state is buying will one day be.

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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