COMMENTARY: Post wrong on U.S. Sugar deal

Monday, August 31, 2009

By SAM POOLE

In your Aug. 10 editorial ("U.S. Sugar deal: Good to go") you advocate that:

U.S. Sugar deal

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1) The U.S. Sugar lands are "extraordinarily well-suited" for restoration;

2) The 1999 Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan is outdated because it was prepared with no conception that the U.S. Sugar lands would be available, and:

3) It is reasonable to expect federal money to buy and use U.S. Sugar lands.

Unfortunately for the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and the estuaries, all three positions are incorrect. The public should hope for a successful appeal to the Florida Supreme Court of last week's validation by Palm Beach County Circuit Judge Don Hafele of bonds for the U.S. Sugar purchase.

1) U.S. Sugar owns only a small part of the land most suitable for restoration. Almost half of the initial 73,000 acres approved for purchase are higher elevation citrus lands with no value for key restoration objectives.

This consensus emerged from the South Florida Water Management District "River of Grass" public workshops initiated in January. Meeting twice each month, stakeholders, with assistance from district staff, produced and evaluated nine alternative solutions to enhance restoration. Many of the original CERP scientists and stakeholders participated.

As with CERP, the participants selected land for their project designs based primarily on environmental needs and adjusted for factors such as location of towns, costly public and private capital facilities such as roads, bridges, canals and pumps, power lines and railroads, and impacts to public lands. Property ownership was not a significant factor.

The result? Given the choice of any Everglades Agricultural Area lands they wanted, only two of the nine alternatives used significant parts of the 32,500 citrus acres, and with 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar lands to choose from, the average each project used was 51,000 acres. In other words, only 28 percent of U.S. Sugar lands were considered well-suited for restoration.

2) This "River of Grass" process disproves your argument that CERP partners did not anticipate the availability of essential land in the EAA.

CERP must be updated because we have 10 more years of Everglades science. The same key people participated. Both planning efforts used science and cost-effectiveness, not ownership, as the primary basis of planning.

We would have been foolish to accept a U.S. Sugar "now or never" deal before we prepared CERP. Now that we have a science-based restoration plan, it makes even less sense to close a "now or never" deal knowing that almost half the initial purchase is useless and only 28 percent of the 180,000 acres is considered the right land for restoration.

3) Closing this high- stakes deal without the up-front buy-in of CERP partners is as rational as skydiving without a parachute, hoping to find a partner with a parachute for two. Everglades restoration will be a decades-long effort by an essential partnership of public, tribal, landowner and non-government interests.

Trust among these partners that decisions are rational, science-based and transparent is fundamental to success. The U.S. Sugar deal is a solo jump by the water district that is neither science-based nor rational, but based on the hope of finding a use for the U.S. Sugar land and a partner with money.

It is audacious to predict that our federal partners will cost-share not only the $12 billion CERP project, but the added $14 billion to $17 billion in U.S. Sugar-based projects, plus the $200 million to $400 million per year to operate them. Even if cost-shared, these sums greatly exceed the district's financial capacity. The Obama administration is serious about restoration, but these projects go well beyond two presidential terms.

Note that our federal partners have made no commitment during the frenzy of the deal. We will be asking them to participate after the closing, when the euphoria has passed and science and cost-effectiveness are the standards for project design. This deal will not stand that scrutiny.

Perhaps the water management district's taxpayers can wear the barrel U.S. Sugar has us over.
