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By **THE PALM BEACH POST**

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Cleaning and storing water that flows into Lake Okeechobee from the north isn't the whole solution to Everglades water needs south of the lake. Still, it's part of the Everglades solution. In addition to being worthwhile, the idea to work with cattle ranchers and farmers might be innovative.

Under a \$5 million demonstration project led by the World Wildlife Fund, eight landowners have been implementing relatively simple steps, such as filling ditches or adding culverts, creating wetlands to trap stormwater before it gets flushed quickly down river to Lake Okeechobee. By saturating pastureland that often is too wet for grazing during the rainy season, the approach recreates animal habitat and removes damaging concentrations of phosphorous and nitrogen left by fertilizer and manure.

The public, however, has to understand what the approach is not. This plan will not reduce the amount of land needed south of the lake to store water for release into the Everglades during droughts. Therefore, the program north of the lake would not reduce the need for the \$536 million U.S. Sugar land deal. And even if the approach were started now, it would be very hard to carry it out on a scale needed to help the state meet its 2015 phosphorous-reduction goal for Lake Okeechobee. That deadline already has been extended by a decade.

Critics — notably U.S. Sugar's biggest competitor, Florida Crystals — suggest that the U.S. Sugar deal will shortchange water storage north of the lake while failing to meet the needs south of the lake. Florida Crystals consultant Sam Poole, a former South Florida Water Management District executive director, made that argument Monday to the Joint Legislative Committee on Everglades Oversight. Florida Crystals, however, is looking to disrupt the U.S. Sugar deal, which it views as the state bailing out a financially struggling rival.

The push for more water storage north of the lake has the initial backing of the water management district, which matched a \$1 million federal grant in 2005. The plan calls for entering into contracts with landowners to manage the land, but the World Wildlife Fund has not yet calculated how much it would cost to conduct the program on a large scale.

To be effective, it would have to cost less than buying land and building costly above-ground reservoirs. A similar proposal from The Nature Conservancy calls for the purchase of easements, instead of annual contracts. Both proposals give ranchers an incentive to continue managing their lands — relieving the water district of a major expense — while resisting pressure to sell to developers. The vast region north of the lake includes the proposed city of Destiny at Yeehaw Junction and the Heartland Parkway, a highway contrived to develop rural lands. Destiny would be the wrong city in the wrong place.

The proposal also would offer more control over the flow of water into Lake Okeechobee, which environmentalists argue persuasively needs to be kept at a depth of between 12.5 feet and 15 feet. If

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water comes in more slowly, the lake won't rise so quickly. The proposal wouldn't meet needs south of the lake because ranchlands would dry up every year, with the expectation of being replenished during the rainy season.

The district has disputed Florida Crystals' suggestion that there can't be water storage both north and south of the lake. If the district continues to get positive reports from the demonstration project north of the lake, though, the district will have to find the money to do both.

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I think all, or most, of Destiny is in the St. Johns River WMD. It would have no impact on Lake Okeechobee. The SFWMD already has a 900 acre storage area called Nubbin Slough that hasn't had a drop of water put in it since it was built, about 5 years ago. Now they are building another one near and don't have water to put in either one. Just spend money and build big pits with no water.

FL Crzr
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