

[Print Article](#)[Print This Story](#)

Saving wetlands, farms and the Everglades

The Tampa Tribune

A land deal in South Florida last month shows how it's possible to protect the environment, property rights and the agricultural industry at the same time.

And Thursday, the lengthy effort to restore the Everglades could take a big leap forward when South Florida Water Management District officials vote on a proposal to put more land under public control.

In July the federal government agreed to pay \$89 million for 26,000 acres of pastures and woodlands on the northern reaches of the Everglades. The goal is to protect Fisheating Creek watershed, which runs into Lake Okeechobee.

As U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam told The Associated Press: "You can't repair the lower Everglades without repairing the northern Everglades."

The acquisition of permanent conservation easements will allow the restoration of wetlands that filter water flowing into Okeechobee, whose waters flow into the Caloosahatchee River and then into the Gulf of Mexico. So, improving the water quality of the creek will have far-ranging benefits.

The deal also will protect key wildlife habitat and a popular site for camping and canoeing.

The landowners will be allowed to continue using the tract as a ranch, but they won't be able to develop it and will have to comply with special safeguards to protect the watershed. This will protect both jobs and habitat.

The agreement highlights how much progress has been made on the conservation front in the last 20 years.

In the late 1980s the Lykes family, which owns a major stretch of the creek and had protected it from development, sought to close it to the public. The family said it was trying to protect the waterway from litter and degradation.

Former Attorney General Bob Butterworth effectively battled the move, with a court finding the creek was a navigable waterway and thus under state jurisdiction.

The legal battle ultimately was resolved when the parties agreed on a preservation plan. The state purchased an 18,272-acre corridor along the creek, which it established as the Fisheating Creek Wildlife Management Area. Under the deal, the Lykes family also agreed to limit use of another 42,000 acres.

The latest development, which involves four prominent ranching families, including that of state Sen. JD Alexander, will allow the further restoration of the resource. It is being acquired under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wetlands Reserve Program, a voluntary program that compensates landowners for preserving and restoring wetlands but which also allows continued use of the land.

The state uses a similar strategy when it buys the development rights to farmland. Such efforts spare the government from having to pay the full market price, but give landowners a powerful incentive to

maximize the ecological value of their property.

The federal government's purchase of easements on this land north of Lake Okeechobee is well-timed. On Thursday, the South Florida Water Management District will decide whether to approve a deal to purchase another 26,800 acres - south of the big lake.

This land, owned by U.S. Sugar, is critical to restoring the Everglades. Under the agreement, the district board also has options to buy about 153,200 additional acres over the next 10 years if economic conditions permit it.

The pending proposal, which has been scaled back due mostly to economic concerns, warrants approval. About \$197.3 million from the water district's cash reserves would be used, allowing immediate public ownership of the land.

Taxpayers also are being protected with the modified proposal. The previous deal carried a price tag of \$536 million for 73,000 acres, with options to buy an additional 107,000 over 10 years. The district showed fiscal responsibility by amending the terms in light of the economy.

It is important to carefully scrutinize the restoration effort to make sure taxpayers get their money's worth.

And buying easements where possible will ensure a healthy future for Florida's natural resources and also for agriculture - Florida's second largest industry, whose importance to the economy and environment is often overlooked.