

## Everglades needs sugar land: Without it, restoration stalls, and there are no other sellers.

By **THE PALM BEACH POST**

Updated: 6:55 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2010

Posted: 6:51 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 11, 2010

The U.S. Sugar land deal, whittled to one-seventh of its original size, deserves the support today of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board. But it no longer is the game-changing deal once touted by environmentalists and Gov. Crist.

The new deal to buy 26,800 acres for \$197 million, however, makes sense for two reasons. It would provide land to satisfy a 2008 federal court ruling that the federal and state governments have failed to clean water entering the Everglades, breaking a promise in the 1994 Everglades Forever Act. It also would give the water district a chance, when the economy improves, to buy more of U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres in Palm Beach and Hendry counties. That land in the rich farming belt bordering Lake Okeechobee will be needed to store water for the Everglades. And sellers in that area don't come along often.

Unfortunately, this sale - the fourth in a succession of ever-smaller deals from the \$1.75 billion proposal to buy all of U.S. Sugar's assets - requires the district to apply a single price of \$7,400 per acre to all of the land, including the less-valuable 17,723-acre Southern Gardens grove in Hendry County. The result: The district would pay \$35 million over appraised value for the grove.

But the district argues it would pay that same \$7,400 per acre for sugar cane land east of Pahokee that could be worth as much as \$12,000 per acre, a saving of \$40 million. The district would retain its option to pay \$7,400 per acre for an added 153,000 acres over three years, and at market rate over the following seven years.

That 8,900-acre cane field is far from the ideal site for water storage: 25,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land south of Lake Okeechobee. The district chose the 8,900 acres because of that court ruling, and U.S. Sugar, as spokeswoman Judy Sanchez said, would not sell its best land knowing that the district "might not be buying the rest of the land."

The option to buy more land remains important. District tax revenues have been shrinking because of falling property values and the board's refusal to increase the tax rate. A new governor could mean a new board and that could mean no land buys at all.

The problem from U.S. District Judge Alan Gold's ruling dates to the 2003 decision by a previous district board and the Legislature to delay until 2016 the deadline for the district to meet water quality standards for runoff entering the Everglades. While the water is much cleaner, it remains polluted.

In 2008, Judge Gold exposed a devious and complicated effort to get around the old December 2006 deadline and eliminate real standards. It was a calculated political favor to farmers decried by this newspaper and environmentalists. In April, Judge Gold condemned the half-hearted federal response to his 2008 order. He gave the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency until September to draft a real plan and ordered the EPA secretary to appear in his Miami courtroom on Oct. 7 to show why she should not be held in contempt.

This small purchase won't be enough to make Judge Gold or the public happy. Because of what happened in 2003, Florida must shift for a while from water quantity for the Everglades to water quality. But as Governing Board Chairman Eric Buermann noted, correctly, restoring the Everglades means buying land. This land is available, and the water district should buy it.

- Joel Engelhardt,

for The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board

---

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.palmbeachpost.com/opinion/editorials/everglades-needs-sugar-land-without-it-restoration-stalls-854540.html>

 Print this page  Close