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A Times Editorial

Scaled-down deal on Everglades land should be approved

In Print: Thursday, August 12, 2010

The land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. that goes before the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District today is a far cry from the ambitious Everglades restoration plan that Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled in 2008. But the scaled-down deal would still put tens of thousands of acres into reviving Florida's River of Grass, and the district should salvage what it can with its declining tax revenues. The move would buy the state time to act on its larger vision after the economy recovers.

Under the more modest deal, the district would buy 26,800 acres of land for \$197 million — 17,900 acres of citrus in Hendry County and 8,900 acres of sugarcane in Palm Beach County. That is a small fraction of the original deal Crist first proposed two years ago, which called for buying approximately 180,000 acres for \$1.75 billion. But the state could not even afford a proposal floated last year to buy less than half the property. The current deal provides the district with several options over the next 10 years to purchase the remaining 153,000 acres.

Scaling back is disappointing, but it is time to be practical. The state has no way to buy a major chunk without increasing taxes or jeopardizing water-use projects in the 16 South Florida counties the district covers. The deal has sat on the table for two years, and it is time to make a decision. The district would pay cash for the land, thereby avoiding financing costs. By not issuing new debt, the district saves its borrowing power to finance the optioned land later, when financing could be cheaper.

The tracts the district would buy immediately in Hendry and Palm Beach counties are small pieces of what will be required to revive the southerly flow of water from Lake Okeechobee into the Everglades basin. But they are important starts. The land could be used for water storage and treatment, improving the water quality flowing into the basin. They would help the state comply with two ongoing federal lawsuits that seek to improve water standards in South Florida. And the land buy would build on the federal government's recently announced plan to preserve some 26,000 acres north of the lake, the headwaters of the basin.

One challenge in this slow economy and anti-government climate is keeping long-term, costly projects like Everglades restoration on track. The district spent the summer examining how to acquire the one element essential to restoration — land — without breaking the bank. This scaled-down deal is a pragmatic way forward. It sends a message that the Everglades must remain a priority. The district should approve the deal and then work with the federal government on the next phase of restoration.

[Last modified: Aug 11, 2010 07:23 PM]

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