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Shrunken land buy still right for Everglades: Editorial

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It's a shocking shadow of the epic land deal announced two years ago, but the state purchase of 26,800 acres from U.S. Sugar to restore the Everglades and help protect Southwest Florida from pollution is still a good first step.

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The \$197 million buy approved Thursday by the South Florida Water Management District will in part help redirect flood waters south from Lake Okeechobee.

That southern flow way for excess lake water is crucial for Southwest Florida. The Caloosahatchee River and its estuary were devastated in 2004 and '05 by polluted lake water that had to be released to prevent damage to the dike which protects lakeside communities.

Historically, such water moved south. If that flow way is restored, the Caloosahatchee can stop serving as a sewer.

Two years ago, Gov. Charlie Crist announced plans to buy all of U.S. Sugar's more than 180,000 acres. Since then, water management district revenues have plunged 30 percent, forcing the plan to be scaled back several times. The district still has a 10-year option to purchase U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,200 acres.

"(The 26,800 acres) provides us a framework for acquiring the rest of the land," said Jonathan Ullman of the Sierra Club. "It gets the ball rolling."

The economy will have to recover a lot for more land to be bought, and even the scaled-back deal faces criticism that it is a bailout for U.S. Sugar. There are legal challenges as well.

But this a first step in a long journey to a healthier environment for southern Florida.



The Everglades (Britannica Blog/britannica.com)

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- The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan
- South Florida Water Management District

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