

A vote for U.S. Sugar deal: Special master says it's right move at right time.

By **THE PALM BEACH POST**

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Critics of the deal to buy U.S. Sugar's land received a rebuke last week - a sharply worded report that will guide a federal judge's decisions in how he should protect the Everglades.

John Barkett, special master for U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno, found that water managers were correct to halt construction of a 16,000-acre reservoir in western Palm Beach County, even though they had spent about \$280 million on the first phase of construction. The reservoir wouldn't help water quality, he concluded, and building it now would mean missing the opportunity presented by buying U.S. Sugar's land.

"It would be both disappointing and surprising if the state and the United States did not figure out a way to assist the district in truly re-creating the River of Grass," Mr. Barkett wrote. "Everglades? Or Neverglades? At some point, political and business leaders have to implement their commitment to save this Florida and United States ecological treasure; promises just won't do anymore."

Critics had attacked the South Florida Water Management District for dropping the reservoir, even though its location - given the U.S. Sugar purchase - is best suited for conversion into a shallow-water marsh known as a stormwater treatment area. Such marshes cleanse water, so it can meet strict pollution standards before entering the Everglades. The district stopped before a point of no return, and argued that the work just as easily could lay the groundwork for a treatment area.

Because of declining tax revenue, the water district has reduced its purchase of U.S. Sugar land to \$197 million for 27,000 acres. Those two properties are meant to help with water treatment, not water storage. U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals, the Miccosukee Tribe and politicians seeking to capitalize on voter discontent, argue that the U.S. Sugar purchase wastes money and stops progress on ongoing projects. Mr. Barkett disagrees: "The question presented is whether the district is allowed to change its mind on a remedial approach. The answer is a qualified 'yes.'" It's the right recommendation to Judge Moreno.

- Joel Engelhardt,

for The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board

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