

Big land sale will help slake Florida's thirst

By Eric Buermann, Special to the Times

Published Wednesday, December 24, 2008 4:36 PM

America's Everglades received a vote of affirmation this month when the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board approved the purchase of more than 180,000 acres of agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee. The land will be used to protect and restore one of the nation's most valuable treasures.

The heart of Everglades restoration is water. Scientists have long recognized the need to capture vast quantities of rainfall, store it, treat it and deliver it to the natural system with the right timing, quantity, quality and distribution. Only then will the wildlife of the Everglades be sustained, critical drinking water sources replenished, coastal estuaries protected from lake discharges and abundant, clean water flow south into Florida Bay. This is especially critical for the long term, as we anticipate global climate changes and the associated sea level rise that will inevitably impact Florida's coastlines.

This historic land acquisition provides the unprecedented opportunity to store and treat water on a scale never before envisioned. It is the single most important action to protect the Everglades since the designation of Everglades National Park 60 years ago, and it is a key moment in time. But make no mistake, Everglades restoration is about much more than wildlife and birds.

Consider what a healthy Everglades means to South Florida. The quality of life for 7.5-million residents depends entirely on the water held in our natural system. We depend on it for drinking, recreation, agriculture, landscaping, well-field protection, boating, fishing and countless other components that contribute to a healthy economy and the Florida way of life. The 2006-2008 water shortage vividly reminded us how much we need adequate water storage to sustain our environment, our economy and our quality of life.

Gov. Charlie Crist's vision to acquire this vast tract of land for Everglades restoration was a monumental step forward, and I applaud him for it. The approval of the largest land purchase in Florida's history was a milestone, but there remains a great deal of work ahead. In the coming months, we will work hard to finalize financing and complete our due diligence. Equally important, we will work closely with our partners — local communities, the Florida Legislature and our federal restoration partners — to assure that the resulting environmental project achieves our restoration goals, sustains regional agriculture and supports the local economy.

The Everglades once covered almost 11,000 square miles of South Florida, but today this invaluable place is about half that size. Protecting what remains is essential to protecting South Florida's ability to thrive as a productive region of our state. The immense benefits of this acquisition and its lasting value to Florida are nearly beyond measure, and the acquisition cost is small in comparison.

Eric Buermann is chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.