

# Florida's Louisiana Purchase

By Eric Buermann, special to the Times

Published Tuesday, May 19, 2009

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Everglades restoration has been a priority at the South Florida Water Management District for more than a decade. That priority was underscored this month with a landmark decision by the district's governing board to invest \$536 million in the largest land buy in the agency's history — a 73,000-acre acquisition that will provide unprecedented opportunities for preserving the River of Grass.

When the multibillion state-federal partnership to restore the Everglades was first developed in the 1990s, access to vast areas of agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee to construct restoration projects was not a possibility. But that changed last June when Gov. Charlie Crist announced the willingness of the United States Sugar Corp. to sell its land holdings to the district for Everglades restoration. It was a milestone moment for the environment — followed by months of complex negotiations, hard work and due diligence.

Over many months of deliberation, the district's governing board carefully weighed the restoration opportunities of this purchase with the agency's additional responsibilities for flood control, water quality improvements and protection of the regional water supply. With fiscal realities in mind, the board approved an affordable acquisition strategy that would place 112 square miles of strategically located property into public ownership by next year, with an option to purchase another 167 square miles during the next 10 years.

This historic acquisition promises incalculable benefits to the River of Grass and to Florida's coastal estuaries. Most notably, projects are contemplated that will improve water quality treatment to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades and prevent tons of harmful nutrients from entering the fragile ecosystem. Other projects will significantly increase water storage, improving the flow of water to the Everglades, reducing harmful freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and virtually eliminating the need for "back-pumping" stormwater runoff into the lake. Without this land, opportunities for some of these projects and their benefits could be lost.

While allowing for economic conditions to improve, the phased approach to acquiring land also helps to sustain agriculture in the region, an important part of the local and statewide economy. Furthermore, it will provide at least a decade for the Glades communities, which depend heavily on agriculture, to work with the state and other partners to develop new industries and growth opportunities for their region.

Acquiring these strategic lands is the first step in realizing our restoration goals, which will require vision, leadership, cooperation and partnership at all levels. Project planning, now under way with scientists, engineers and a diversity of interests, must remain an inclusive and collaborative process. Project permitting with regulatory agencies must be streamlined so that unnecessary and costly litigation does not impair our efforts. And our federal partners in restoration must continue to deliver their share of project funding. This vast area of land will serve the Everglades — and the economy — when dirt has actually been turned and constructed projects are in the ground and operating.

In our board discussions, I often compared this acquisition to the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 brought more than 800,000 square miles into public ownership and doubled the size of the United States. President Thomas Jefferson believed the controversial purchase was a priority investment, and history proved him right. This acquisition is not nearly on that scale — but for Everglades restoration, it feels that big. And it promises equally big opportunities in return.

*Eric Buermann is chairman of the South Florida Water Management District governing board.*

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