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Kirk Fordham: U.S. Sugar's land deal saves jobs, restores Everglades

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The world's largest ecosystem restoration took a decisive step forward when Gov. Charlie Crist announced an amended proposal to purchase more than 70,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land for Everglades restoration.

The governor's proposal provides land to address the biggest water-quality problems in the Everglades.

Virtually everyone agrees that the Everglades needs to be saved. After all, the spectacular River of Grass provides the source of drinking water for millions of Floridians. Tens of thousands of jobs in the fishing, boating, tourism and real-estate industries depend on a clean and healthy Everglades.

Families and children's groups enjoy the dozens of public parks within the Everglades as an escape from our busy urban centers.

Scores of rare and endangered species — from the Florida panther to the Southern bald eagle make their homes in the Everglades. Allowing this one-of-a-kind ecosystem to disappear would have devastating consequences.

The effort to acquire U.S. Sugar's land for Everglades restoration began with an announcement by the state to purchase 187,000 acres. This was later followed by an agreement to acquire just over 180,000 acres.

The current agreement has been altered to reflect tighter budgets and leaner economic times and would allow the state to acquire 72,500 acres. It provides those who work in the sugar-growing communities south of Lake Okeechobee an opportunity to remain in business for the foreseeable future. This transaction will offer the state new opportunities to clean up polluted run-off from sugar farms and urban areas before it flows into the Everglades and stop the back-pumping of contaminated water from cane fields into Lake Okeechobee.

In addition, the contract's 10-year option gives the South Florida Water Management District an opportunity to purchase a remaining 107,500 acres — practically all the land needed for restoration. Special interests that have a financial interest in killing this critical land acquisition argue the purchase will block the completion of other restoration projects. These charges are simply untrue. This land acquisition is the foundation of a visionary plan providing opportunities to sustain our water supply, lessen the impact of Lake Okeechobee's polluted discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers and restore Florida Bay.

Finalizing an agreement to acquire land south of Lake Okeechobee to help the ailing Glades is a critical step forward. The existing state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and the Northern Everglades program to restore and protect Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their estuaries can finally be made to work in a way that benefits the communities that depend on clean water and recovered fisheries.

Should this transaction fail, U.S. Sugar Corp. could auction its land holdings to other willing buyers who are

already pushing dangerous plans to build landfills, rock mines and massive commercial developments in the middle of the Everglades.

Imagine how difficult and expensive the state's job of acquiring land for restoration in those circumstances would be and what irreversible abuses to the land could be perpetuated. No one who is truly concerned about a healthy Everglades and the economic benefits it provides to diverse industries such as agriculture, tourism, fishing, and boating would want to see that happen.

This historic land acquisition is an opportunity for us all. It requires vision — something that was woefully lacking before Crist suggested this approach to Everglades restoration.

We applaud Crist and U.S. Sugar for negotiating a creative, flexible and more-affordable solution to improving our water quality, saving the Everglades and preserving the jobs that are dependent on its survival.

Kirk Fordham is CEO of the Everglades Foundation in Palmetto Bay.

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