

Mary Barley: Purchase price for U.S. Sugar acreage a bargain

Even great land deals not without critics

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True restoration of America's famed River of Grass was given long overdue hope Dec. 16, when the South Florida Water Management District voted to buy 180,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp.

This purchase of sugar cane fields will provide critical land for storing, treating and moving water needed for Everglades restoration. The acquisition will lead to clean water for people and nature, not to mention the return of the abundant wildlife that once characterized South Florida.

Like all great land deals this one is not without its critics. But the \$1.3 billion purchase price is a bargain when all its benefits are considered.

Everglades restoration has been hindered by the refusal of sugar companies to sell land at a fair price in order to allow additional treatment and storage projects to be built. Now the public can get this land at a reasonable price. In fact, taxpayers will save billions of dollars by not carrying out the former plan, which depended on expensive, piecemeal manipulation of water. How long can Florida afford to simply clean up water polluted by others? Now we can let the water flow from Lake Okeechobee south, getting cleaner rather than dirtier along the way, through a managed system of reservoirs and wetlands.

Removing much of the land now farmed from sugar cane production will reduce runoff from phosphorus saturated soils - runoff that harms wildlife habitat and pollutes the Everglades. The economic benefits that people will enjoy, including enthusiastic tourism coming back to life, a vibrant Lake Okeechobee filled with fish and fowl for the public and our tourists, are alone enough to justify the purchase. Yet, the ultimate benefit of no longer managing our water system primarily for sugar production leaves open the financially smart option of solving South Florida's water supply woes once and for all by using less to irrigate sugar.

People also matter and for too long the communities of the Everglades Agricultural Area have been held hostage to sugar cane companies. The mayor of Pahokee, an incredibly impoverished area, pleaded recently for freedom from the encirclement of "Big Sugar," which has stifled the town's growth and continues to cause misery. Lake communities, really company towns, will need help in the future, when after a seven-year lease, the U.S. Sugar land is finally used for restoration. But those communities now have a new lease on life. They can plan an alternative making use of their most attractive asset - being near the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee.

The communities will benefit also from the construction of infrastructure and projects necessary to re-establish the historic connection between Lake Okeechobee and the fabled River of Grass. The system of storage and treatment projects will provide jobs for years to come. The residents of Glades and Hendry counties and the city of Clewiston also now have the opportunity to pursue economic development including an "inland port" (an intermodal complex to transport goods).

Before this historic vote, the opportunity and flexibility of storing and cleaning water on such a large scale could not be contemplated. The existing state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, in tandem with the Northern Everglades program championed by Governor Crist in 2007 to restore and protect Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their respective estuaries, can finally be made to work in a way that really works for the communities depending upon clean water and recovered fisheries. The people around Lake Okeechobee deserve nothing less. For too long, they have suffered in relative silence.

This purchase is an opportunity for us all - the citizens of this state, our environment and ultimately our economy. Granted, it requires some daring and adventure and with that comes some fear and doubt. Mostly it requires vision, something woefully lacking before Governor Crist suggested this approach to Everglades restoration.

- Mary Barley is vice chair of the Everglades Foundation.