

Letters to the editor: Debating the latest U.S. Sugar deal

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No deal without focus on main goal: Everglades restoration

I have been hopeful with each version of the U.S. Sugar deal that we'd end up with a plan that would enhance existing Everglades restoration efforts at an efficient cost. Unfortunately, the latest iteration - once again void of purpose or business sense - has left me disappointed.

Yes, the present opportunity is monumental; the availability of land and focus on restoration is greater than before. But the process, which was flawed from the start, has continued down the wrong path. The district - the purchaser itself - was sidelined from the onset. Staff were basically handed a gift-wrapped box and told to accept it without looking inside. Why have we allowed U.S. Sugar to dictate the terms of Everglades restoration, and why have we bowed to the company's take-it-or-leave-it conditions, which have left us purchasing citrus and development lands that will provide minimal benefit, if any, to the Everglades?

For example, no explanation exists as to why the district is expected to pay top dollar for citrus acreage. The plan calls for purchasing 32,000 acres at about \$6,200 an acre. We have been told that only 12,000 of those acres can be used, and we can sell the remainder at a par with the grossly inflated purchase price. Adjacent citrus land is available at a lower price with no willing buyers. The plan's land usage doesn't add up either. The district would retain an option to buy U.S. Sugar's remaining 107,000 acres, but no plan or study outlines why the land would be needed.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was developed almost a decade ago as an open process. Florida has invested more than \$2 billion in CERP, and we have yet to complete a single project. If we want to address restoration enhancement needs, let's do it within the blueprint we've already painstakingly developed.

With the U.S. Sugar deal, we don't have a clear-cut plan, and the wrong lands are being purchased. Instead of using the money to buy citrus and development land, why not use it to acquire more land in what Gov. Crist called "the sweet spot" where a flowway could be developed? We are voting on another bad business deal that will not get us where we need to be. It also may leave the district unable to provide such core services as water supply and flood protection. Let's negotiate a deal with Everglades restoration at its heart.

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Editor's note: Mike Collins is a member of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.