Hope for Everglades

Crist's inspired deal a giant step forward

In a word, brilliant.

Kudos to Gov. Charlie Crist for brokering a deal for the state to purchase 187,000 acres in the Florida Everglades. Restoration of the fragile ecosystem, mired in a fiscal quagmire for years, no longer appears unimaginable.

Major hurdles remain. But Crist's agreement with U.S. Sugar Corp. lends great hope that one day years from now clean water will flow into the parched River of Grass.

Environmentalists are hailing the agreement as "breathtaking." Even the sugar giant, no friend to environmental organizations, describes the deal as a "watershed event in national conservation history and a paradigm shift for the Everglades."

The big question for taxpayers is how can state government afford the $1.7 billion purchase price after slashing billions from the budget just weeks ago. That's the beauty of this deal, if it goes through as currently designed.

The South Florida Water Management District, which serves 7.5 million people in 16 counties, would foot the bill using cash reserves now and long-term notes to pay off the debt over 30 years. The district's current property taxes would cover payments. As a result, though, other Everglades projects would not get funded.

How this agreement came about shows inspired thinking by Crist.

First, two key rulings put U.S. Sugar in an economic stranglehold. Environmentalists sued to make the company quit pumping polluted farm runoff into Lake Okeechobee, and in 2006, a judge ruled the practice violated the Clean Water Act. In 2007, the South Florida Water Management District, a defendant in that 2006 case, voted to halt the practice.

Fearing ruin, U.S. Sugar sent two high-powered lobbyists to meet with Crist eight months ago. But the governor had other ideas, proposing the state buy everything in U.S. Sugar's hands. Secret negotiations then led to an agreement.

The purchase price still must pass muster with property appraisers.

The agreement, expected to be finalized in November, allows U.S. Sugar to continue working the land rent-free for six years. The big question is what will happen to the company's 1,700 workers.

Employees own 35 percent of the privately held company, so some compensation will be forthcoming. U.S. Sugar plans to offer incentives to keep employees during the next six years, and will offer severance packages. The company also hopes other growers absorb some workers.

And the state has smartly stepped up with plans for creating jobs and boosting the economies in the impacted communities. That, too, is a credit to Crist.
Today, Florida stands on the cusp of reviving the $10 billion restoration of the Everglades. The U.S. Sugar land will reconnect Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Pollution flowing from the lake into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers will be stopped. The polluted water in those river estuaries damages both fishing and tourism.

Those are but two issues that will be solved by this land purchase.

Crist tarnished his green image last week with his newfound support for offshore drilling along Florida's coast, a threat to our pristine beaches and our tourism industry.

While the Everglades land purchase will not overcome that damage, this is truly a sweet deal for our environment.

Talk back

Should Florida purchase this Everglades land for $1.7 billion? Or is this too expensive? Share your views at bradenton.com/opinion.