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Editorial

A Chance for the Everglades

The languishing effort to revive and restore the Everglades -- one of the most ambitious environmental initiatives on the planet -- received an unexpected and potentially spectacular boost on Tuesday when Gov. Charlie Crist announced that Florida had agreed in principle to buy 187,000 acres of farmland from the United States Sugar Corporation, the state’s (and the nation’s) largest sugar-cane producer.

The farmland, located along the southern edge of Lake Okeechobee, would be converted into reservoirs to store water and artificial marshes to help clean it.

The $1.75 billion deal would remove a big source of phosphorus pollution, which sugar-cane farming produces in abundance. The greater benefit would come from restoring a good part of the historic water flow between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades -- a flow that sustained the Everglades for centuries but has since been diverted (at great cost to the ecosystem and its wildlife) to Florida’s cities and farms.

We also hope that the deal will shame Washington into shouldering its full responsibility. The landmark $8 billion restoration plan signed into law by President Clinton in 2000 called for a 50-50 split in costs between Florida and the federal government.

Florida has been living up to its share, contributing $2.4 billion even before this latest deal. Under President Bush, willfully indifferent to most environmental issues, and an inattentive
Congress, the federal government has contributed less than $400 million -- a pathetic showing.

As a result, the restoration project is way behind schedule. And while the state got a bargain from United States Sugar -- which has suffered internal financial problems as well as pressure from state regulators -- rising land values have pushed the plan’s price tag to more than $11 billion, making federal support even more essential.

The cooperation of the notoriously dysfunctional Army Corps of Engineers will be at least as important as more federal dollars. There is no point in storing billions of gallons of fresh water unless a path can be cleared for it to reach the Everglades. That will require the Army Corps to reshape the spider web of canals and levees standing between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

Success will also require a fundamental shift in Florida’s politics far beyond this deal. There are many reasons for restoring the Everglades. It is, even now, an irreplaceably diverse storehouse of plant and animal life. But it will have no real future if the commercial powerhouses that have ruled Florida for so long -- the developers, the water utilities and their political allies--continue to grab a disproportionate share of the water.

Governor Crist, at least, seems determined to make sure that, this time, nature gets its due. The next president and Congress, and the Army Corps, must help him.