Editorial: Sweet deal for Everglades

The breathtaking announcement that the State of Florida will buy U.S. Sugar and all its holdings in and around the Everglades is a milestone in restoration of the River of Grass.

The purchase will add a chunk of land almost as big as Florida's largest state forest — the Blackwater River State Forest, spreading over 200,000 acres in Santa Rosa and Okaloosa counties — and greatly expand the restored wetlands at the heart of Everglades restoration.

No, the Everglades can never be restored to its original size or health; South Florida is too developed for that. But restoring 187,000 acres of sugar cane, citrus groves and processing facilities will remove a huge source of the nutrients now contaminating the Everglades, and allow restorative reconstruction of the natural wetlands that once marked the area.

Also good is that the $1.7 billion purchase price (minus revenue from leasing the land to U.S. Sugar until it ceases operations) will come from bonds repaid by taxes collected within the 16-county South Florida Water Management District, which was established to help protect water resources.

It is an ironic turnabout that the massive, high-value development in South Florida will make possible the purchase that was made necessary by that development, which came close to destroying the Everglades.

Conservationists have dubbed the U.S. Sugar land the "missing link" in the Everglades project in that it lies directly between the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee.

It will help bring back the Everglades system's natural water flow, which used to gradually wash, in a wide shallow sheet, from Okeechobee down the Florida peninsula to Florida Bay and the ocean.

Gov. Charlie Crist called the deal "as monumental as the creation of the nation's first national park, Yellowstone." That might be an exaggeration — but perhaps not much of one.

This land, unsuccessfully sought for years for this very purpose, could well be the key to an effective restoration of the Everglades. State officials are showing needed foresight in purchasing it.