U.S. Sugar land purchase will be worth it

South Florida Sun-Sentinel Editorial Board

June 26, 2008

ISSUE: State to buy out U.S. Sugar to restore Everglades.

It's not quite the Louisiana Purchase, but for those wanting to restore the Florida Everglades, the possibility of acquiring U.S. Sugar's vast land holdings comes pretty close. As unexpected opportunities go, this one is huge.

That's why state leaders have little choice but to diligently pursue the completion of the landmark deal hammered out between Gov. Charlie Crist, the South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar Corp. The agreement has its hurdles, but its potential to re-energize restoration efforts cannot be pushed aside.

According to the deal, Florida would pay $1.75 billion to U.S. Sugar, which would continue farming the property for the next six years before turning over 300 square miles of land located north of the federal Everglades National Park to the state. The land will provide enough space to store up to 325 billion gallons of water, enough to replenish regional water supplies and prevent wasteful and polluting runoffs to the sea.

There are still enough twists and turns to scuttle this deal. Water managers and officials at U.S. Sugar must come to terms on the purchase price and any required land swaps and long-term lease arrangements. Crist and water managers must make the case that the purchase price is worth it to taxpayers. Already there's murmuring that the deal is nothing more than a bailout of a troubled industry.

There's also the economic impact of the loss of the state's oldest, and one of the nation's largest, sugar growers. U.S. Sugar employs more than 1,700 people and owns enough farmland to produce about 9 percent of the nation's beet and cane sugar acreage. A phased reduction will help but the loss of a major employer typically hurts, particularly in the rural areas surrounding Lake Okeechobee.

As time passes, the need for an open and transparent process is essential if state leaders hope to win public support for the purchase. For the moment, though, give credit to state officials for devising an alternative that would have been unthinkable only months ago.
BOTTOM LINE: U.S. Sugar sale is an opportunity that must be pursued.

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