June 27, 2008

Our view: Hope for the 'Glades

Crist's plan holds great promise for quicker restoration of the River of Grass

Gov. Charlie Crist's historic $1.75 billion bid to reclaim a huge chunk of the Everglades by buying out U.S. Sugar -- if it plays out right -- would be an enormous step forward in restoring the mighty River of Grass.

The deal is far from settled, but calls for the purchase of 187,000 acres of the sugarcane producer's land south of Lake Okeechobee and restoring the natural flow of water southward to the Everglades.

And despite its high price, could mean tremendous cost savings.

"It may prove to be much cheaper to have purchased (the land) than to try to fix the Everglades with Big Sugar standing right in the way," says Jim Egan of the Marine Resources Council of East Florida in Palm Bay.

State environmental groups are hailing the proposal as a monumental victory not just for the Everglades, but also for the St. Lucie River, now used as a toxic drainpipe for releases from Okeechobee.

That's where Brevard County's Indian River Lagoon comes into the picture.

The state's agreement "will have a long term benefit to the south Indian River Lagoon, particularly the St. Lucie Estuary, which has been impaired by freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee," says Ed Garland of the St. Johns River Water Management District.

And stormwater runoff and agricultural chemicals funneled into its south end from the St. Lucie contribute to the declining health of the lagoon, where dolphin and other marine life increasingly are ravaged by disease and infection.

That's why we hope the land purchase -- which includes a six-year transition of ownership of land and company assets -- can be pulled off by state negotiators.

But only after potential drawbacks that can't be ignored get some tough scrutiny.

Those include:

- Tradeoffs that could harm the IRL in the short term.

That's because money previously set aside to build stormwater treatment areas and reservoirs east of Lake Okeechobee to filter water before it reaches the lagoon could be used for the land purchase, delaying those needed projects.

- Sheer cost. Pegged initially at $1.75 billion by Crist, the price tag for the deal has already jumped to $2.2 billion, according to the South Florida Water Management District.

That's supposed to come at no extra cost to the state because SFWMD would pay off a loan for the project annually using existing property taxes -- but what happens if costs continue to climb?

State appraisers must put the purchase under the microscope. U.S. Sugar, which has benefited for years from huge government tax breaks, shouldn't be given too sweet a deal.

- Not letting Washington off the hook for its share of Everglades cleanup costs.

Half the price for the $8 billion restoration plan approved by Congress in 2000 was to be paid by the federal government, with Florida picking up the rest.

But so far Florida has ponied up $2.4 billion, while the feds have chipped in a puny $4 million. That has delayed work and raised estimated costs for completing the project by almost a third to $11 billion.

Crist's deal can't become just another excuse for the federal government to short Florida on its pledge.

Instead its potential cost-savings should motivate Congress to pay up, so restoration work can move more quickly.