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Editorial: Feds must help restore River of Grass

The South Florida Water Management district delivered one of its most important decisions last week when it unanimously approved the negotiation process for the potential $1.75 billion purchase of 187,000 acres of land from the U.S. Sugar Corp.

A major outcome of this decision for us in Southwest Florida will be a significant decrease of the damaging discharges of freshwater into the Caloosahatchee River.

But in the big picture of the Everglades, this decision is a gigantic piece of the restoration puzzle of this natural jewel, which the federal government started eight years ago under the Water Resources Development Act of 2000.

This bill set the framework to guide the implementation of a joint federal-state, 30-year effort to restore, preserve and protect the South Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the area. This effort is known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

In these past eight years, however, the federal government has failed in its commitment.

More than $7 billion has been spent so far, but two-thirds of that has come from the state.

Between 2000 and 2006, Florida has outspent the U.S. government on Everglades funding by $2.5 billion. During that period, Congress has failed to appropriate any new money for CERP and because of it, restoration projects are years behind schedule. Not even one of the 60 projects that make up the CERP has been completed.

Congress reauthorized the water resources act just this year.

With the water management district's acquisition of the U.S. Sugar land, the state of Florida has come to the rescue of the Everglades restoration effort one more time. This decision would certainly accelerate this plan as it solves one of the major hurdles, which is the purchase of land.

But the acquisition of this land is only part of the job. The federal government needs to do its part and it's only fair.

The Army Corps of Engineers must commit to the elevation of the 11-mile portion of the Tamiami Trail by the Shark River Slough area.

This highway acts as a dam. It reduces southward flow while clogging the Everglades' northern flank.

Restoring sheet flow is the basic foundation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan to re-plumb the "River of Grass" and safeguard South Florida's water supply.

If the right fix isn't implemented with the Tamiami Trail, none of the rest of the revamped project after the acquisition of the U.S. Sugar land will be as effective as intended. The Corps of Engineers must refocus and direct its energies to restoring full sheet flow.

The price tag for the elevation of the Tamiami Trail is high, about $1.6 billion according to experts, but this recent boost in Florida's restoration efforts should give the federal government an incentive to fulfill its commitment to the 50-50 cost-sharing agreement originally enacted into law under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.

We urge the Florida delegation to see that funds are appropriated in Congress for this purpose. Florida is doing its part. It's only right that the federal government does the same.