Editorial: Sugar deal can save jobs, river

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With Florida's economy reeling and her treasury on a forced diet, modifying the state’s purchase of U.S. Sugar Co. property in the Everglades makes sense, environmentally and economically.

But the new plans must give priority to environmental goals while easing the negative economic impacts of the purchase by keeping some of the land in agricultural production.

Of crucial importance is using the purchase to create a southern flow way for excess Lake Okeechobee water. That would mean much less contaminated water dumped into the Caloosahatchee River and Lee County's coastal estuary, as happened in 2004 and 2005.

The purchase renewed hope that the Everglades Restoration plan might actually be realized. Continuing agriculture on part of the state land must not be allowed to dash that hope.

But that said, we have learned this bitter year that jobs that can be saved should be saved.

The changes announced today are expected to reduce the acreage to be bought from 187,000 to 182,500 leaving U.S. Sugar with no crop land but still in possession of its high-tech sugar mill, citrus-processing plant and other industrial assets.

This cuts the state's price to $1.34 billion from the original $1.75 billion, plus interest.

Originally, the company was going to phase out its sugar business in six years. Now it appears agriculture may continue on parts of the property. That could keep the company's 1,700 employees on the payroll and ease the impact on the lake region economy.

There has been talk of other economic development in the region, including construction of an ethanol plant. Ethanol production using sugar and other more efficient raw materials than grain would be a plus all the way around and a good fit with Gov. Charlie Crist's green energy plan.