Editorial: Florida needs sugar acreage

U.S. Sugar should follow through on its agreement to sell 181,000 acres south and east of Lake Okeechobee to the state for Everglades restoration. That deal is fair to shareholders, and in the public interest.

The attempt by a Tennessee-based farming company to acquire the land, if successful, might compromise those restoration plans, including protection of coastal estuaries like Lee County’s from the kind of devastation they suffered in 2004 and 2005 from the release of polluted lake water.

The state deal promises a giant leap forward in plans to restore as much as possible of South Florida's ecosystem.

That's because the land - as much of it as necessary - would be used to restore the natural southerly flow of excess lake water in the wet season, and to cleanse and conserve that water. That not only saves the east and west coast estuaries from being dumping grounds for agricultural pollution, it can also rescue Everglades National Park and the Florida Bay/Florida Keys system off the state's southern tip, all imperiled by inadequate or polluted water. It's a fantastic opportunity.

But if the land is sold instead to the Lawrence Group of Nashville, the priority may remain with the commercial production of sugar cane in the Everglades, which is a huge part of the environmental problem to begin with.

We sympathize with the need to preserve jobs in the lake region, but not at the expense of the environment. Economic development based on a healthy ecosystem is far more promising and sustainable than sugar cane farming.

Lawrence says its offer of $588 million is significantly better than the state's $1.34 billion offer because shareholders would be freer under their offer to invest the proceeds of the sale. The state and U.S. Sugar have yet to respond to these claims. The state's offer is hardly a lowball one; one analyst says it's $400 million too high.

Lawrence promises to work with the state on restoration projects. But what good is such a promise if the company’s motive for getting involved is to farm the Everglades?

The state has yet to determine how much acreage will be needed for restoration. Estimates range from 95,000 acres to 140,000 or more.

But the state should buy it all, then sell, swap or lease for farming any excess land, once we're sure it's not needed for restoration.

Happy Thanksgiving
It's tough out there.

On Thursday, no matter how bad things might be, you're bound to be thankful for something. Focus on that, even if it's just for the one day.

Remember the good times.

If your life is good, you're better off than many this Thanksgiving. Give thanks.