The ambitious proposal for Florida to buy U.S. Sugar land could finally ensure the survival of the Everglades, the hydrological heart of South Florida. So the importance of the proposal can hardly be overstated.

Nevertheless, that shouldn't blind state officials to the need to make sure the costs and terms are reasonable. The plan was developed in secrecy and final details have only recently been released.

Now the South Florida Water Management District, the agency that will acquire the land, is faced with a Dec. 16 deadline to approve the contract.

There should be no guesswork here. State officials must be confident taxpayers are paying fair market prices before committing to the deal.

No question, the proposal, which has been scaled back somewhat since Gov. Charlie Crist announced the plan last June, is compelling.

Under the plan, the state would pay $1.34 billion for 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land north of the Everglades. Runoff from agricultural operations on some of this land has steadily polluted the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and coastal waters.

The state would use much of the property to build reservoirs that would store and filter water before it would be released.

But it's unclear exactly how much land would be needed for these filters. Some estimates put it at 100,000 acres.

So Hendry County Commissioner Kevin McCarthy asks a reasonable question: "Why are we buying 182,000 acres when you only need 100,000?"

Another question: Is the $1.34 billion price tag appropriate? At least one appraisal put its value far lower, though state officials say other reviews have confirmed the negotiated price is fair.

Under the plan, the state would lease the agricultural land back to U.S. Sugar for at least seven years at $50 an acre. The price seems low, but officials say it will save the state $40 million in land management costs as well as bring in $50 million in revenue.

All such details need to be carefully attended.

The revised deal is, without question, superior to what was floated in June, which would
have required the state to buy all of U.S. Sugar's assets, including its mill, a railroad, buildings and other facilities.

Now the company will maintain those operations, which will cut about $400 million off the price and preserve about 1,700 jobs, an important consideration for rural communities.

It's also important to realize the purchase requires no tax increases.

It will be funded by property taxes already levied by the South Florida Water Management District.

The state agency oversees water policies in 16 counties, whose citizens will directly benefit from the Everglades restoration. Beyond restoring the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee and estuaries on both coast, the project will safeguard the region's water supply.

The district is the lead Florida agency in the much-stalled state and federal $8 billion project to restore a natural and clean water flow to the River of Grass. This acquisition could guarantee the success of that venture.

No transaction is perfect. U.S. Sugar, obviously, should be fairly compensated. And Florida must not squander the opportunity to finally save this unique and gravely threatened resource.

But state leaders also should make certain they don't rush into a deal that, in a few years, would be viewed as a rip-off.