Sugar deal invests in South Florida's future

The revised land-purchasing deal between the South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar is more generous to the private partner than is generally advisable in a tax-financed agreement.

U.S. Sugar has negotiated a take-it or leave-it contract that the water-management board can only accept or reject without alterations. For a firm $1.34 billion, the district will buy 180,000 acres of farmland. For its part, U.S. Sugar will continue to farm the land for another seven years, paying rent for only six. The rent is $50 per acre, coming to just over $9 million a year. The company also will pay $21.5 million for environmental remediation. The ultimate costs of cleaning up the land have yet to be determined.

Both parties benefit

However, the revised deal is much better than the one originally negotiated between the company and Gov. Charlie Crist. For $1.75 billion the district would have bought all of U.S. Sugar's assets -- the land, a railroad, sugar factory, refinery and a citrus processing facility. The district only needed the land -- not the railroad and sugar mill -- which will be an important addition to the Everglades clean-up plan.

The reality is, as sweet a deal as U.S. Sugar will get if this contract is approved, the long-term benefits to the Everglades ecosystem and South Florida's water supply matter more. If the district refused this sale, years from now we would be looking back in regret at a terrible, costly mistake.

Much of the land will be used to store and treat the phosphorus-laden water from the Everglades Agricultural Area that is too polluted to be sent to the Everglades. When Lake Okeechobee is too high, water is released into the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries. The effects -- algae blooms, fish kills and the stench of rotting seagrass on beaches -- are devastating to the two coasts.

In a column for this newspaper, Audubon of Florida Executive Director David Anderson spelled out some of the benefits of purchasing the farmland:

• Improvements in the delivery of cleaner water in the Everglades.
• **Prevention** of thousands of tons of phosphorus from entering the Everglades.

• **Elimination** of back pumping water into Lake Okeechobee.

• **Increasing** water storage to reduce harmful freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee to coastal rivers and estuaries.

• **Sustainability** of agriculture and green-energy technology.

What's more, the added land will help to replenish the Biscayne Aquifer, stabilizing South Florida's water supply in times of drought. Once it no longer is farmed, the land will sustain more Everglades wildlife. It provides new options for water managers who these days manage a system that is more a series of reservoirs than a contiguous slow flowing shallow river.

**Daunting cost, worthy goal**

The costs -- for acquisition and for the eventual environmental cleanup -- are daunting, especially considering the current recession in which even solvent public institutions are having trouble getting financing. The district will have to sell bonds. It will have to go to Wall Street and talk about the long-term investment in the Everglades and how this land-buy enhances the $11.8 billion federal-state replumbing plan known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Of how it is a major investment in South Florida's basic infrastructure: its water supply. Of how it is not a perfect plan, but one that is necessary for Florida's future.