Since plans to buy U.S. Sugar were announced in June, South Florida Water Management District Director Carol Wehle has said that the path to restore the Everglades would not go through the sugar mill owned by the other sugar conglomerate, Florida Crystals.

That became evident in a map presented Tuesday by Ms. Wehle's agency. It shows a wide swath of U.S. Sugar land on the southern border of Lake Okeechobee. But only a small portion of that land, part of the district's $1.34 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar, would be used for a giant reservoir to help restore the Everglades. The reservoir design, dubbed the "rocking chair" by district staff, is narrow at the top, like the back of a rocker. Farther south, it widens greatly to form the seat bottom.

Why isn't it wide all the way down? Refer to Ms. Wehle's comment: Such a design would put the Okeelanta sugar mill, owned by U.S. Sugar rival Florida Crystals, under water.

District staff said that it would take two to three years to develop a restoration plan. But they've already placed a strict limit on brainstorming. The Florida Crystals mill and a huge swath around
it are off-limits.

Florida Crystals is taking advantage of that gift. On Wednesday, Palm Beach County commissioners agreed to consider changing the land use on 319 acres next to the mill so that the company can compete for a warehouse district called an inland port. The proposal depends on Florida Crystals winning a site selection competition but would be just a first step toward setting aside up to 3,000 acres for an inland port.

The inland port holds the promise of jobs. To Palm Beach commissioners, those jobs should be in Palm Beach County, not Martin or Hendry, which also may pursue them. But there's no guarantee that an inland port would work. And the competition hasn't even begun. The changes initiated Wednesday simply give Florida Crystals a better chance to be selected.

The unanswered question is whether that land would be better used for restoration. It won't be up to restoration scientists. Just as they were told years ago to restore the Everglades without using any sugar land, they would begin this second chance with one option off the table.

Florida Crystals says moving its mill, or even swapping it for U.S. Sugar's mill in Clewiston, is a deal-killer. And the district still needs to make a deal with Florida Crystals. In fact, district officials said Tuesday, to accomplish the "rocking chair" plan, they would need more non-U.S. Sugar land - 60,000 to 65,000 acres - than U.S. Sugar land - 40,000 to 45,000 acres. Most of those 65,000 acres are owned by Florida Crystals.

It's astonishing that the district would spend $1.34 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar's land - 182,500 acres in Palm Beach and Hendry counties - to get 45,000 acres. Efforts to achieve even the restricted "rocking chair" plan put Florida Crystals in the catbird seat.

In conceding the inland port to Florida Crystals, the water district could be realistically assessing costs: Even in a $1.34 billion deal the prospect of moving a mill may be too costly to entertain. Or the district could have been cowed by Florida Crystals' lobbying might. Or perhaps the concession is the district's good-cop approach to win critical trade-offs later.

If that's the case, the district is bumbling the routine. Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens told the district board Tuesday that the company's proposals have gone unanswered, and Crystals is angry that the district would give U.S. Sugar a lease at below-market rates to keep farming for seven years. If the district wants to talk about land swaps, Mr. Cantens said, "Call us in seven years."
With $1.34 billion at risk, seven years is too long to expect even the district to wait. Try as they might to pacify Florida Crystals, it hasn't been enough.

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