Big Sugar deal -- bold or reckless?

By CARL HIAASEN

The latest version of Florida's Big Sugar buyout was described by Gov. Charlie Crist as "nothing short of miraculous."

Actually, it's not miraculous. Not yet.

Crist's plan to purchase 181,000 acres of cane fields near Lake Okeechobee is audacious and unprecedented. But many years will pass before we know whether it's a miracle or just a pipe dream, one more exorbitant disappointment in the long struggle to save what's left of the Everglades.

Instead of buying U.S. Sugar outright for $1.75 billion, the governor's new deal would have the state acquiring only the company's land, not its facilities, for about $1.34 billion.

The purchase has two environmental goals: To remove vast tracts from active sugar production and reduce harmful pollution to the Everglades, and then to piece together some of that land as a flow-way of fresh water from Lake Okeechobee southward toward Florida Bay.

But it wouldn't happen quickly. Under the contract terms, which still need approval by the South Florida Water Management District's governing board, U.S. Sugar would continue farming most of the fields under a lease-back arrangement that would pay Florida only $50 per acre.

The state would receive 10,000 acres initially, but it would have to wait seven years for an additional 30,000 acres. That's a long time, and a pretty sweet deal for U.S. Sugar.

Among the many questions swirling around the purchase, the most obvious is: Where's the money coming from? The water district says it can finance the buyout by selling bonds -- a highly optimistic strategy, given the bloodbath on Wall Street.

Most experts agree that the state won't need all 181,000 acres to create an Everglades flow-way, which means the surplus acreage theoretically could be sold to U.S. Sugar's main competitor, Florida Crystals, to partially offset the purchase price.
Assuming that the money for the deal can be raised somehow, getting the land is only the first step. Nobody knows what it will cost to clean up the cane fields, or how long that would take.

History is not encouraging. Thirteen years ago, the water district spent $12 million for the 5,200-acre Frog Pond in South Miami-Dade. Today it's still being farmed.

**Affecting water supply**

In 1999, the district paid $133 million for the Talisman tract, more than 55,000 agricultural acres in Palm Beach County. The purpose was to build a humongous retention reservoir, which to this day exists only on paper.

From its birth, the improbable mission of restoring the Everglades has been waylaid by sticky land negotiations, lawsuits, logistical hurdles and a shameful lack of interest by Congress and the White House.

The federal government was supposed to be a 50-50 partner with Florida on Everglades-related projects, but last year the General Accountability Office reported that the state was outspending the feds two-to-one. Work was lagging far behind schedule. While some progress had been made, not one of 60 core projects of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was completed. Once priced at $8 billion, the CERP is currently projected to cost almost $12 billion, a figure that will surely rise.

The alternative to spending the money is to pull the plug, and eventually say goodbye to the continent's most unique and productive wetland -- not to mention South Florida's fresh water supply. Builders find that prospect as horrifying as environmentalists do.

Overdevelopment remains as much a culprit as agriculture in the killing of the Everglades. Much of the phosphorus and other cruddy runoff gagging Lake Okeechobee comes from subdivisions as well as cattle ranches to the north, along the Kissimmee River.

Until the state cracks down in that region, the lake has no chance of getting healthy again, and neither does the Everglades system it feeds.

Ironically, Big Sugar has probably done more to tidy up its act than most other polluters. Maybe the cane barons grew a conscience, or maybe they were scared of losing those lucrative government price supports. Their motive doesn't matter -- the waste water from the sugar fields is cleaner today than it was a few years ago.

Still, returning almost 300 square miles of farmland to nature would be an ecological boon
to the Everglades and a political coup for Crist.

It's tempting to be swept up by his ambitious vision, but remember that he'll be long gone from the governor's mansion when the state finally gains access to the U.S. Sugar lands. That's one reason the details of the contract must be nailed down solidly.

The new deal is being presented by the company as take it or leave it, and the water board is due to vote on Dec. 16 -- after having barely one month to scrutinize a complicated $1.34 billion transaction.

It's nuts. There's a fine line between being bold and being reckless, and plenty of big dreams have died because somebody wasn't wise enough to know the difference.