Editorial: Sugar deal can be sweetened, but it's too good to pass up

Pact might not be perfect for state, but it will dramatically improve environment

By TCPalm Staff

Wednesday, December 10, 2008

Opportunity.

It's the one word many environmentalists use when describing the state of Florida's proposed acquisition of 180,000 acres of land in Clewiston from U.S. Sugar.

They differ only in the adjectives they employ to accentuate the opportunity.

"It's the most amazing opportunity we'll ever have to restore the River of Grass," said Karl Wickstrom of the Rivers Coalition, a group of concerned citizens formed to stop discharges into the St. Lucie River and Indian River Lagoon.

"I just think there is an extraordinary opportunity here," said David Guest of Earthjustice, an environmental advocacy group, of the proposed land deal.

"This acquisition represents one of the most important opportunities to protect the Everglades ecosystem in recent years," said Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Amazing.

Extraordinary.

Most important.

Most people readily agree that recreating the natural flow of water from Lake Okeechobee through the River of Grass to Florida Bay would have enormous, positive effects on South Florida's ecosystem.

However, several criticisms have been raised about the proposal, which calls for the state to pay U.S. Sugar $1.34 billion to acquire the property. Under the agreement, the sugar
The sugar company would be allowed to lease the land for seven years — at $50 per acre — and would be required to pay the South Florida Water Management District (the buyer) $21.5 million to deal with contaminated farmland. U.S. Sugar also would place $10 million in an escrow account to cover the costs of unforeseen pollution problems.

The sugar company also has an offer from the Lawrence Group of Tennessee, but has signed a contract with the water district.

The district's governing board has until Tuesday to approve or reject the proposal.

Opponents have raised a number of important issues:

• Should the state allow U.S. Sugar to lease the property for $50 an acre when typical lease rates range from $125 to $325 an acre?

• Will the lease agreement create an unfair business advantage for U.S. Sugar, as other sugar growers contend?

• Will the deal destroy the economic viability of local communities dependent on the sugar industry?

"This could literally bring us to our knees," said Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness.

• Can the state afford a $1.34 billion investment at a time of rapidly declining tax revenues?

• Is this the best deal the Water Management District's governing board can obtain from U.S. Sugar?

The potential benefits far outweigh the numerous negatives.

Wickstrom foresees a rebirth of both the Everglades and the Indian River Lagoon if the deal is consummated.

"Plant and animal life in the Everglades will be reinvigorated," he said. "Our (St. Lucie) estuary, which would experience a huge decrease in the volume of water pumped out of the lake, would be gorgeous again."

Additionally, 13 million pounds of phosphorus a year — Wickstrom's estimate — used to fertilize U.S. Sugar land no longer would pollute South Florida's ecosystem. And the opportunity to create "world-class birding, world-class nature trails and world-class kayaking in the Everglades" could offset the loss of jobs in the sugar industry and "provide many recreational jobs in the area."

There are a lot of issues at stake here.
The Water Management Board should listen to Wickstrom. Every reasonable effort should be made to get the best deal for the state, but in the end the future of the Everglades turns on this acquisition and others like it.

Wickstrom has long argued that it is the relatively uninterrupted flow of sufficient water south, water that is not contaminated, that will sustain the Everglades.

This is a chance to re-open the way for that flow.