Extend U.S. Sugar deal deadline

Like everything involving the Everglades, the state's agreement to purchase 72,800 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land for $536 million has its share of champions and critics. But though it's less than perfect, the deal is worth doing.

Backers say it's a long-term investment in Everglades reclamation -- the biggest land acquisition ever that will go a long way to help clean Florida's environmental jewel. Skeptics say it's a costly taxpayer bailout of U.S. Sugar that will steal funding from other restoration projects.

Some criticism is justified. The 2008 agreement, struck behind closed doors by Gov. Crist and U.S. Sugar, wrongly shut out other Everglades stakeholders, such as the Miccosukee Tribe and Florida Crystals. The initial plan to buy all the company's holdings for $1.75 billion has been downscaled twice. But the state is still paying too much.

The latest plan, beset by delays and lawsuits, is set to expire March 31 unless the South Florida Water Management District's governing board, the buyer, extends the deadline.

Unique opportunity

It should be extended -- the deal's biggest selling point is its huge value in taking so much land out of sugar production and putting it in the public's hands forever. Such a chance might never come again. An extension will give the district time to review its budget to decide if the purchase remains feasible given the economic downturn and projected costs of other restoration projects. Might it negotiate the price downward given the market?

Proceed despite misgivings

When the jointly funded state-federal Everglades cleanup plan went into effect in 2000, the idea of public acquisition of a big chunk of land for restoration in the Everglades Agricultural Area below Lake Okeechobee was thought impossible. But the impossible happened. So while there are misgivings, the governing board should continue its support.

That land would eventually be used to store and clean water flowing into the Everglades. The cost to convert the land to reservoirs and filters will be high, but the benefits are equally valuable. For flood control, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers releases water from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, killing off their marine hatcheries with runoff pollution from agriculture and development. The U.S. Sugar land would ultimately take the excess lake spill-off, sparing the estuaries.

Those acres could also serve as the first real link in restoring natural sheet flow from the lake to the Everglades, though that is contingent on other long-shot land purchases. Still, so was the idea of buying the U.S. Sugar property once.
Till last fall, the state had invested much more in restoration than the federal government. But the Obama administration wiped out years of gridlock with a down payment of $350 million, creating welcome momentum for restoration.

Putting the brakes on the U.S. Sugar acquisition would cast a pall over the newfound, justified optimism that one day the Everglades will again be a true "River of Grass."