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Editorial - A Good Deal for the Everglades

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EDITORIAL

A Good Deal for the Everglades

The effort to restore Florida’s Everglades has been revived thanks to the efforts of President Obama and Florida’s Republican governor, Charlie Crist. The Obama administration has committed more than $300 million in new money, and construction on important projects — including lifting a section of the Tamiami Trail to bring freshwater to the Everglades — is under way.

Last week, the state agency that oversees the restoration voted unanimously to press forward with Mr. Crist’s controversial — but potentially game-changing — $536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres of land from the United States Sugar Corporation. The land would eventually be taken out of agricultural production, removing a major source of pollution, and converted into reservoirs and artificial marshes to store and clean water for later release into the Everglades during the dry season.

The agency — the South Florida Water Management District — had been under mounting pressure to kill the deal. Florida Crystals, another big and politically connected sugar company, lobbied ferociously against the deal with its rival. Some environmentalists complained that Mr. Crist paid too much and that the cost of the deal would crowd out other restoration projects.

But some of those projects — a string of underground storage wells, for instance — made little sense to begin with and none are as important as the land deal. The payout to United States Sugar and some other aspects of the deal seem excessive. But the agency can negotiate the price downward or cancel the arrangement if United States Sugar refuses to bargain or if the economy keeps tanking and the deal becomes unaffordable.

What the taxpayers need to remember is that this is a very good deal for the environment. Without an ample supply of clean, fresh water, the Everglades will never be restored to anything approaching their former vitality.

There is no shortage of rainfall in Florida. What’s in short supply is places to store it during the rainy season when Lake Okeechobee overflows, places from which the water can be released when it is needed during the dry season to nourish wildlife, prevent catastrophic fire and provide clean water to Florida Bay.

Far more will have to happen to restore the water flows that once sustained the Everglades. But the United States Sugar lands are a critically important first step.