Editorial: Politics and the environment

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Decades of environmental recklessness have left us depending on the political system to fix problems. And that often creates a bigger mess.

It confirms an old truth: Do it right the first time, and you don't have to fix it later.

Like the Everglades.

Since the 1800s Floridians have abused this world-class ecosystem that, left to itself, created a natural paradise, abundant in water and wildlife. Despite expensive, long-term efforts to drain and control it, and the poisoning of it through pollution, the Everglades has hung on.

In recent decades, even the most conservative politicians — like former Gov. Jeb Bush — have realized the error and dedicated billions of dollars to fixing it.

Now Gov. Charlie Crist is in hot water for his proposed deal to buy huge parcels of land from U.S. Sugar and restore them to something resembling their natural condition.

Does he deserve the criticism? Yes and no.

The deal is now much smaller — largely due to the recession cutting available revenue — and worse, more suspect. Behind-the-scenes maneuvering leaves the impression of questionable decisions and that the deal has become more about saving U.S. Sugar than the Everglades. Especially since the latest package leaves gaps between parcels — a questionable approach given that a primary goal is to reconnect large swaths of land to restore natural water flow.

Also, buying the land stresses the budget of the South Florida Water Management District, which will finance it, and postpones or cancels other projects that were considered crucial to Everglades restoration.

But environmentalists are rallying to support the deal, saying that even in its smaller form it is good for the Everglades.

Meanwhile, George LeMieux, Crist's former chief of staff and appointee to the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Mel Martinez, popped up with a chance to profit from the negotiations. He says he won't take any money from the deal, but his law firm, which represents U.S. Sugar, will.

But one of the prime critics turns out to be Jeb Bush — which raises questions about his role.

Bush is said to be smarting because Crist abandoned Bush's restoration plan, which critics say was based on risky, unproven technology, and more about providing water for development than restoring a natural Everglades.

Bush is also tied to Marco Rubio, running against Crist for the Senate. And both Bush and Rubio are tied to U.S. Sugar's competitors, Florida Crystals, which is opposed to the deal and to restoring the Everglades because it could hurt its operations.

So doing the right thing — restoring the Everglades — is hung up in a political cat fight that would have been unnecessary if Florida had simply done the right thing from the beginning.