Glades decision growing worse

Cost to buy up U.S. Sugar land threatens to delay money needed for C-111, Florida Bay project

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A crisis-level funding plan prepared for the South Florida Water Management District could adversely impact the long-delayed C-111 Canal project designed to improve water quality in Taylor Slough and Florida Bay.

The Miami Herald reported Friday that the scaled-back Everglades plan promoted by Gov. Charlie Crist is now running into funding problems, chiefly how to borrow the $500 million needed to buy land from U.S. Sugar.

We should not be surprised at this latest turn of events, which puts nearshore waters in the Florida Keys lower on the state's priority list to address.

Mike Collins, an Islamorada backcountry fishing guide who served on the district's governing board, warned of this back in 2008.

He said then the governor's ambitious plan to buy up 182,000 acres of sugar and citrus fields south of Lake Okeechobee wouldn't fix the Everglades.

"The Everglades system doesn't work the way it used to," Collins told the Keynoter. "It's a myth that getting more land will make it work. We've found that's not true. The system is on life support, and we're going to have to pump water to storage areas."

According to the crisis plan prepared for the district, cuts to existing Everglades projects -- including $35 million intended to overhaul the C-111 Canal on the Monroe-Miami-Dade line -- could be at risk.

This bad news comes on the heels of a controversial vote last week when the district governing board extended the deadline on the U.S. Sugar deal, while admitting the current financial climate makes the cost of borrowing the money prohibitive.

Back in 2008, the grand plan carried a $1.34 billion price tag. But critics cried foul, saying negotiators failed to challenge the amount of land needed and cost per acre.

Since that botched initial deal, the scope of the purchase and the price per acre have both been reduced. But it still leaves taxpayers in 16 counties, including Monroe, facing a huge half-billion-dollar price tag.

And worse, it puts at risk other water quality restoration projects already underway, including the C-111 canal work.

That should be alarming and here's why:

The C-111 Canal, finished in 1968, was designed mainly as a flood-control safety valve. Unfortunately, it proved to be too deep and too effective at moving massive amounts of surface water directly to the sea. As a result, it drained more than half of the headwaters for Taylor Slough, which is considered the primary source of fresh water for Florida Bay.

And it's that balance of saline and fresh water that makes Florida Bay a breeding ground for all kinds of marine species. Not proceeding to fix the C-111 Canal means no help for Florida Bay.

It's not too late for the district board to step back or significantly amend the ill-advised U.S. Sugar deal.

But time is running out and if the sugar deal proceeds, it will suck up all the funds available for many more critical water-quality needs throughout our region.