Editorial: Public deserves honest answer to question: What effect will U.S. Sugar deal have on other water restoration projects?

Editorial board

Tuesday, April 6, 2010

What projects will be delayed or not completed if the South Florida Water Management District consummates its $536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration?

The district’s governing board needs to be forthcoming with the public on this issue.

The question — and answers — are important.

The agency’s stated mission, in part, is to “manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.”

The proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar land has presented the district with an enormous opportunity to accelerate Everglades restoration. But at what cost to other components of the district’s mission: improving water quality, flood control, etc.? And what effect would the U.S. Sugar purchase have on projects designed to help the St. Lucie estuary?

The $536 million price tag may force the governing board to make difficult decisions about more than a dozen restoration projects, some of which already have begun and others that have been planned for years.

The public deserves to know what’s at stake if the water management district completes this landmark deal.

Asked if the purchase will force the district to shelve other projects, Eric Buermann, chairman of the district’s governing board, said “I don’t think so.”

Buermann’s response sounded more hopeful than realistic.

In 2008, one month after Gov. Charlie Crist announced the deal to purchase U.S. Sugar land, the state suspended work on the 25-square-mile A-1 reservoir on the northeastern edge of the Everglades. Why? Concerns the district can’t afford to complete both the $800 million reservoir project and purchase U.S. Sugar property.

Last week, a federal judge ordered the state to resume work on the A-1 reservoir.

From the beginning of this process, we have championed the purchase of U.S. Sugar
land for Everglades restoration. Acquiring that land and negotiating with Florida Crystals, another sugar company that owns property that should be transformed into a flowway reconnecting Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, is critical to solving perhaps the deadliest ecological problem on the Treasure Coast.

Buermann is correct when he characterizes the proposed deal with U.S. Sugar as “the opportunity of the century.” But critical decisions must be made — and the district’s governing board needs to be honest and upfront with how, specifically, saving the St. Lucie and the Everglades will be accomplished.