

SFW

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Clough, Alexandra

The real powers behind sugar deal

07/02/2008
Palm Beach Post
Swartz, Sally

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By Sally Swartz-Palm Beach Post

Florida's leaders deserve credit for making the historic decision to buy sugar industry land for Everglades restoration. But don't forget who made them want to do it.

That would be you, the many residents who began, a decade ago, to whine, complain and yell, loudly and constantly, about South Florida's broken water system and the destruction of coastal rivers. The memories came flooding back last week as Gov. Crist, South Florida Water Management District officials and Everglades advocates celebrated U.S. Sugar Corp.'s decision to sell the state its land south of Lake Okeechobee:

Sick fish under a dock in Stuart - struggling to swim upright, with ragged holes in their little mullet bodies - after a 1998 dump of Lake Okeechobee's polluted water into the St. Lucie River.

No water birds.

Pelicans dead from eating sick fish.

Reports of human skin problems from water containing a toxic algae called Cryptoperidiniopsis.

Henry Caimotto at Jensen Beach's Snook Nook, circulating petitions demanding action. More than 30,000 residents signing.

Then-state Rep. Ken Pruitt, R-Port St. Lucie, sweeping into a school auditorium crammed with more than 400 angry Martin County residents, promising river cleanup.

In 1999, then-Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary David Struhs keeping his distance from a dead catfish on Lake Okeechobee's shore. He doesn't want to be photographed beside it while he touts a \$30 million plan to clean the lake.

Florida Oceanographic Society's Mark Perry, now co-chairman of the Everglades Coalition, trekking to Washington in 2000 with a message for a Senate committee. Don't buy more surplus sugar from the big growers, Mr. Perry tells the senators. Buy their land, add marshes to clean the lake water and restore the historic flow south to the Everglades. Imagine that.

At one of countless Save the River rallies when polluted lake water is overwhelming the St. Lucie River, Mr. Perry standing on a picnic table at Flagler Park in Stuart, beside signs warning people that touching the water is a health risk. With a catch in his voice, he remembers swimming in the river's clear waters as a boy.

Hundreds of people at dozens of rallies, waving signs and wearing T-shirts decorated with photos of dead fish whenever the water district sends more lake water to the river. They just won't shut up. They won't go away.

The water management district director, Henry Dean and now Carol Wehle, trying to explain complicated, far-off solutions to furious residents weary of listening to promises.

Former Martin County Commissioner Maggy Hurchalla, sitting through interminable meetings with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, pushing for what later becomes the Indian River Lagoon Restoration Plan.

Martin County's Rivers Coalition, meeting for 10 years and eventually suing the corps for dumping water into the river and causing waterfront property values to drop.

Residents of Florida's west coast communities, suffering from lake discharges into the Caloosahatchee River, entering the fray.

Now-Sen. Pruitt, gathering a small group of lake residents, businessmen and politicians on a sunny Saturday morning in 2005 to give the pols a crash course in Lake-River Issues 101, complete with T-shirts reading "Lake Okeechobee: Our Lake, Our Future."

As important as Gov. Crist, the water district, U.S. Sugar and the Everglades advocates were in forging this deal, ordinary people made it happen because they would not stop demanding that Florida's leaders "get the water right."

Sending more lake water south onto U.S. Sugar's land will keep it out of the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee. Over time, both estuaries could recover. Decades of silt and muck on the river bottoms will have to be removed. But thanks to the people and leaders who listened, maybe - just maybe - Mr. Perry will be able to take his grandchildren swimming in a river as clean and clear as he remembers from his childhood.

Possible Flaws in State Plan to Rescue the Everglades

07/02/2008

New York Times - Online

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DAMIEN CAVE-New York Times

MIAMI - Floridas proposed purchase of nearly 300 square miles of land for Everglades restoration moved forward this week when water managers who would oversee the project endorsed the states \$1.75 billion offer.

But even as most environmentalists here continue to cheer about the acquisition, skeptics have identified complications that they fear will keep the Everglades from being saved. The state, say some hydrologists, federal officials and environmentalists, has bet a huge sum on oft-fertilized farmland that could take at least a decade and billions of dollars to rehabilitate

In short, a rescue plan with more land faces more of the same limitations that have undermined Everglades restoration efforts since the 80s: too much human impact and too little money. Weve had a lot of projects for a lot of years, and they never get done, said Terry L. Rice, a hydrologist who advises the Miccosukee Tribe, some of whose members live in the Everglades. There are big, huge challenges that go well beyond just buying the land, Mr. Rice said. The most immediate concerns center on geography, pollution and cost.

State officials have described the property, now owned by United States Sugar, as a missing link between Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park, but maps of the area make it look more like the video game Tetris. To create a continuous water flow south, state officials have said they would swap land with Florida Crystals, a major sugar producer in the area.

The state is expected to offer land on the lakes southwestern edge, with its fertile muck, in exchange for eastern acres closer to man-made wetlands that are already built.

Florida Crystals, so far, has signaled that it is eager to be involved. Last week, company executives lent environmentalists and scientists a company helicopter to tour the area. And politically, helping the company expand could blunt complaints of lost jobs from the small towns that have depended on United States Sugar since 1931.

But how much land the state might get, and what Florida Crystals might receive in return, has become an issue. The company, which did not respond to calls seeking comment, has a history of using political connections to rebuff regulation, water supply limits or demands to return more of its fields to marshland. The biggest challenge here will be assuring that Florida Crystals acts in an honorable way that balances their desire to maximize profits with their desire to be part of an environmental effort, said Kirk Fordham, chief executive of the Everglades Foundation. They dont need to get too greedy. Adding pressure, the deal is scheduled to close by November. State officials are now scrambling for a better understanding of the area. Weve got a tremendous number of appraisals and environmental assessments to do, said Carol A. Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, the agency in charge of the purchase. United States Sugars land involves several known challenges. In some areas, soil to a depth of 20 feet has been lost. Scientists predict that simply flooding it would create a water-soaked forest of nonnative plants that thrive on the phosphorous left over from fertilization.

Ms. Wehle said the district would have to create a managed system with man-made wetlands that would clean the polluted water from the land and from Lake Okeechobee before sending it to the Everglades.

The cost of such a project remains unclear, but engineers predict that it could top \$1 billion.

That eye-popping price raises perhaps the most feared possibility: that the purchase will be too expensive and too unwieldy to reach its full potential.

Rosa Durando, of the Palm Beach Audubon Society, said that after more than 30

years of environmental advocacy in Florida, she doubted that the purchase would serve nature as much as development. Others predicted that the deal could hurt the Everglades by siphoning resources. Right now, it already portends delays in resources, delays in when it would be completed, delays in when projects would be designed and approved, said Mr. Rice, the Miccosukee consultant and former head of the in Jacksonville. And, unfortunately, whats happening is the Everglades is continuing to die. The fate of the land - like the Everglades itself - will ultimately depend on the federal government. When Congress approved the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan eight years ago, it agreed to a 50-50 state and federal partnership, yet it has contributed a fraction of the \$2.4 billion that Florida has allocated.

The United States Sugar deal would raise the ante. Ms. Wehle, Dan B. Kimball, the superintendent of Everglades National Park, and many environmentalists all agree that it forces a single priority on Congress: finding a way to let water pass beneath the Tamiami Trail, the east-west highway that currently blocks water from reaching the Everglades. Congress authorized the project 19 years ago but never financed it. If the federal government does not release the water down south, said Mr. Fordham of the Everglades Foundation, then the State of Florida will have built the worlds largest swimming pool with absolutely no purpose at all.

THE PURCHASE FROM SUGAR CANE GROVES IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARD EVERGLADES RESTORATION.

07/01/2008

CBS4 News at 11 PM - WFOR-TV

CBS4 News at 11 PM - WFOR-TV

THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT'S GOVERNING BOARD SIGNS OFF ON THE DEAL. THE STATE WANTS TO PAY \$1.75 BILLION FOR THE LAND. THE PURCHASE FROM SUGAR CANE GROVES IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARD EVERGLADES RESTORATION. THIS DEAL COULD BE DONE BY NOVEMBER.

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ALL LAND IN THE EVERGLADES. THE GOVERNOR ANNOUNCED

07/01/2008

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

NBC 6 News at 6 PM - WTVJ-TV

THE HISTORIC LAND DEAL INVOLVING THE EVERY GLADES AND BIG SUGAR IS TAKING ITS FIRST STEPS TOWARD COMPLETION. THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER DISTRICT BOARD HAS OOH NAN NISLY APPROVED THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS TO OBTAIN ALL LAND IN THE EVERGLADES. THE GOVERNOR ANNOUNCED LAST WEEK THAT THE STATE AND THE NATION'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF CANE SUGAR WERE CLOSE TO AN AGREEMENT ON TURNING OVER THE LAND FOREVER GLADES RESTORATION. OFFICIALS ARE SUPPOSED TO HAVE A FINAL AGREEMENT BY NOVEMBER. US SUGAR WOULD THEN BE ALLOWED TO CONTINUE FARMING FOR ANOTHER SIX YEARS BEFORE COMPLETELY CEASING OPERATIONS.

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A BIG BOOST TO EVERGLADES' RESTORATION BUT PEOPLE AROUND

07/01/2008

FOX 29 News at 10 PM - WFLX-TV

FOX 29 News at 10 PM - WFLX-TV

THE BOARD OF SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT UNANIMOUSLY BACKED THE BIG-BUCKS DEAL TO BUY SUGARLAND. THE 187,000 ACRES TARGETED FOR ACQUISITION ARE SEEN AS A BIG BOOST TO EVERGLADES' RESTORATION BUT PEOPLE AROUND LAKE OKEECHOBEE FEAR THE LOSS OF JOBS. THEY HAVE INVESTED ALL OF THOSE YEARS IN THE CITY. GIVE THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO HAVE THEIR LEADERSHIP TO BE AT THE TABLE REGARDING THE FUTURE OF THIS PROJECT. WATER MANAGERS HOPE TO FINALIZE THE DEAL BY NOVEMBER.

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Hank Fishkind July 1 -- The Landmark Deal to Restore the Everglades

07/01/2008

WMFE

David Pitman

David Pitman-WMFE

90.7's David Pitman and economist Dr. Hank Fishkind delve deeper into the deal the state recently announced to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. in an unprecedented move to restore the Everglades.

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FHREDI, stakeholders to discuss ramifications of U. S. Sugar buyout

07/02/2008

News-Sun, The

Shutt, Kevin

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Kevin J. Shutt-News-Sun

SEBRING - Florida's Heartland Economic Development Initiative called an "urgent" meeting to respond to Gov. Charlie Crist's announcement Tuesday of a plan to buy out U.S. Sugar.

Mary Freeman, FHREDI transportation coordinator, said representatives of U.S. Sugar, area businesses and government entities will gather to discuss the ramifications of what is being called Florida's largest conservation purchase in history.

Glades County Commissioner K.S. "Butch" Jones is FHREDI's board chairman and had no comment, but invited the press to attend the 10 a.m. July 21 meeting at Sebring's Agri-Civic Center, Room 2.

Highlands Commission Chairman Edgar Stokes said he was concerned with the approximately 1,700 agriculture jobs that would be eliminated.

"That's a lot of money when the economy is down," Stokes said of the \$1.7 billion buyout. "It just don't seem like it's a good time to be doing this."

South Florida Water Management District funds will be used to buy the U.S. Sugar business.

Stokes was hopeful the district's projects already funded, such as replacing the structure on the east side of Lake Istokpoga, won't be negatively affected.

In a brief statement issued Tuesday after Crist's announcement, SFWMD Chairman Eric Buermann hailed it as a historic achievement for the Everglades' protection and restoration.

"Until (Tuesday), managing the treatment and delivery of water from Lake Okeechobee directly south to the Everglades has remained a distant dream," Buermann said. "I am grateful to the governor for his bold vision in making this dream a reality."

Representatives from the water district didn't return messages Friday regarding the fiscal impact of Crist's plan on district taxpayers.

Storms more the norm this June

07/02/2008
News-Press
Hiraki, Ryan

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by Ryan Hiraki • News-Press

Lee County received more rainfall this June compared with last June, and the increase has helped water supply levels recover from a severe drought - just not enough to remove water restrictions.

The National Weather Service recorded 7.14 inches last month, up from 6.10 inches in June 2007, but still below the month's average of 9.77 inches.

"The wet season is under way," said Nick Petro, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. "We're figuring, pretty much, more of the same, and we'll take what we can get because we've got a long way to get out of this drought in a strong fashion."

Southwest Florida remains in a moderate drought, according to the weather service, although a new drought report due out Thursday could show improvement.

Aquifers, or natural underground storage areas that feed wells, have higher water levels, a couple of them significantly higher, according to numbers compiled by the United States Geological Survey and the South Florida Water Management District. Only three had water levels fall, and not by much.

In Lehigh Acres, the supply of one aquifer rose from 6.17 feet above sea level at the end of February to 14.9 feet by the end of June. And, in San Carlos Park, one storage area went from 12 feet below sea level six months ago to 5.8 feet above.

Despite the rain, water restrictions - two days a week throughout most of South Florida - are here to stay.

"If you're not watering all year and it gets dry, you'll have more water in your aquifers," said Susan Sanders, a water management district spokeswoman.

At one point, the restrictions were one day a week for most South Floridians, until mid-April. State water managers, who oversee all or parts of 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys, recorded 6.64 inches of rain in this area in March and early April, up from 2.97 inches in 2007.

Terry Bengtsson, a water supply coordinator with the water management district, admitted wells are recovering but supports consistent restrictions to help handle future growth.

"Our population is going to grow," he said. "In any way we can offset future demands by conserving water, it benefits everyone."

Region's rainfall 'very good' aid in drought

07/01/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Kleinberg, Eliot

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June rainfall was below normal locally but healthy enough region-wide to ease South Florida's water crisis, meteorologists said Tuesday.

But they warned that the area still isn't out of trouble.

Two-thirds to three-fourths of the year's rain falls during the wet season, and a fifth falls just between the Memorial Day and Fourth of July weekends.

June rainfall was down 13 percent across Palm Beach County and down 17 percent along the Treasure Coast, according to South Florida Water Management District measurements.

But rainfall district-wide was a puddle-full above normal, and a little higher than that in the critical flood plains that flow into still-shrunken Lake Okeechobee, district meteorologist Geoff Shaughnessy said.

The rainfall totals are 'pretty good, considering we got off to a low and late start,' Shaughnessy said. 'Actually, it was very good.'

The lower totals along the coast aren't as critical because surface water recharges quickly, he said.

But, Shaughnessy warned, that doesn't mean everything's copacetic.

'That might be true if Lake O were 4 feet higher,' Shaughnessy said.

'This has met the short-term water need,' Shaughnessy said. 'But the long-term issues remain.'

The big lake stood Tuesday at 9.61 feet, up from 9.58 feet Monday and 9.37 feet Thursday and about eight-tenths of a foot above the all-time low of 8.82 feet, set a year ago today.

July usually brings about 30 percent less rainfall district-wide than June, with August again bringing heavy rains, and often a hurricane or tropical storm, Shaughnessy said.

Although a major storm would bring plenty of needed rainfall, a parade of thunderstorms week after week is preferable, he said.

Palm Beach International Airport wrapped up June with a total of 4.94 inches, only about two-thirds of the historical average of 7.58 inches, the National Weather Service reported.

Since Jan. 1, 26.11 inches of rain was recorded at the airport; that's just 0.41 inches below the historical average for the same period. But much of that rain came during the unusually wet dry season.

Martin County approves 2 initiatives designed to speed up construction projects

07/01/2008

Jupiter Courier

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George Andreassi-Stuart News

STUART Hoping to reverse Martin County's anti-business reputation in tough economic times, the County Commission approved two initiatives Tuesday designed to speed up the construction of facilities for high-paying businesses.

The commission voted 4-1 to enter a memorandum of agreement with the state Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development that sets the stage for economic development projects to receive expedited permitting from local, regional, state and federal agencies.

This is about jobs, said Commissioner Michael DiTerlizzi. This memorandum of agreement, in my opinion, sends an extremely clear message to the State of Florida that Martin County is interested in jobs, and not just jobs, but high-tech, high-wage jobs.

This is extremely important to send that message, DiTerlizzi said. For years, Martin County has had a stigma, a cloud over its head that 'We're closed for business.'

The commission also voted 4-1 to speed up the county's review of plans to 15 days from 30 days for new facilities for high-paying businesses, as well as affordable housing and small scale industrial projects.

The kind of companies we're trying to encourage here are pretty frustrated with the process, said Ron Bunch, executive director of the Business Development Board.

Adopting the package begins to send the signal in Martin County and in the state that Martin County is interested in economic development, that we're not going to be obstructionists, and we're going to change the business climate, especially at a time when families and other citizens of Martin County are having an increasingly difficult time to make ends meet, Bunch said.

Commissioner Sarah Heard, the lone dissenter in both votes, questioned the need for the initiatives, arguing the county would be better off sticking with its strict development rules and analyzing economic development projects on a case by case basis.

I'm not anti-development by any means, but I am anti bad development, whether it be residential or economic development, Heard said. I want businesses and developments that can pay their own way and don't need to skirt our rules.

Earlier during the four-hour-long proceedings, several political activists questioned what businesses would be brought in, how many jobs they would create, and how much they would pay.

Where are the success stories? asked Martha Bennett, a Democratic County Commission candidate from Hobe Sound. I have not seen any concrete examples of where the fast tracking and the incentive process has substantially benefited any community.

But several workers, business leaders and job counselors said it is important to speed up the review of plans and issuing of permits for the development of businesses that pay high wages, diversify the economy, and boost the tax base.

Today's declining economy makes this issue extremely important to the economic vitality of Martin County, said Gwenda Thompson, president of the Workforce Development Board of the Treasure Coast. Since April, the number of unemployed workers coming into our Martin County Career Center has increased 50 percent. Approving the economic stimulus package provides the tools to attract and grow good paying jobs for Martin County.

How they voted

The Martin County Commission voted 4-1 to approve two initiatives that would speed up the county review of site plans and county, regional, state and federal permits for facilities for new businesses that create high paying jobs.

Michael DiTerlizzi: Yes

Sarah Heard: No

Doug Smith: Yes

Susan Valliere: Yes

Lee Weberman: Yes

In other business, the commissions took the following action:

Appointed Dr. Harold Voss, of Stuart, the director of the Volunteers In Medicine neon-natal care clinic, to the county Health Facilities Authority.

Adopted a resolution supporting the proposal for the state to buy 187,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar as part the effort to restore the Everglades.

Approved the final site plan for the Ault Acres subdivision, four houses on 9.53 acres on Southeast Ault Avenue.

Delayed action on a new law limiting the amount of nitrogen and phosphorous in fertilizer applied to turf in urban areas.

Rescheduled budget hearings to Sept. 15 and 30 from Sept. 16 and 23 to avoid a conflict with the school board's budget hearings.

Denied a request by Andrew Perl for \$1.45 million to compensate him for the value his 14 acres of land in Tropical Farms by changing the land use to allow one house per two acres.

Mobile home park says builder should pay for sewer hookups

07/02/2008

Stuart News

Andreassi, George

By George Andreassi -Stuart News

STUART — Wielding an engineering report indicating stormwater from the nearby Tres Belle subdivision ruined their sewage treatment facilities, homeowners in Tropical Paradise want the developer and the agencies that permitted the drainage system to help them pay to hook up to Martin County's sanitary sewer system.

"It sort of backs up our suspicions we had right all along," said Bud Horstmann, the vice president of South Fork Homeowners Utility Corp., about the engineering report. "We don't want to get into a lawsuit with anybody, but we've been harmed. It's just knocked our little old package plant out of service."

The 165 homeowners who were served by the sewage plant face assessments of about \$6,000 each to connect to the county sewer system, Horstmann and county officials said. The \$1 million deal is expected to go to the County Commission by October and the project is due to be completed in early 2009.

The South Fork Homeowners sewage plant was shut down in September when

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unusually high tides, heavy summer rains and water flowing underground from Tres Belle caused the sewage system's percolation pond and drain field to overflow, Horstmann and other homeowners said.

"This failure is correlated with construction of Tres Belle subdivision and filling its retention ponds to levels higher than Paulson Road, a county road that separates Tres Belle from the wastewater treatment plant," wrote Kevin Henderson, of Evergreen Engineering, in a report for the South Fork Homeowners Utility Corp.

Because they believe Tres Belle and the agencies that permitted the subdivision's drainage system caused the water flow that disabled their sewage treatment facilities, Horstmann said the South Fork Homeowners would like the developer and the permitting agencies to help them pay to connect to the county's sewer system.

"We feel somebody should come to our rescue, so to speak, and help us out here financially," Horstmann said. "Most of us in here are on fixed incomes and retired. It's just something that's going to make it rough on a lot of the people, including myself."

Officials with the latest developer of Tres Belle, Kolter Homes, did not respond to messages seeking their response to the claims by the South Fork Homeowners.

Martin County Engineer Don Donaldson, whose department reviews the plans for stormwater facilities as part of the county's development approval process, said he has seen no proof that water from Tres Belle caused the failure of the South Fork Homeowners sewage system.

Deficiencies found in the Tres Belle drainage system in October are set to be fixed once the developer obtains the necessary permits from the South Florida Water Management District, Donaldson said. No construction will be allowed on the 191-home subdivision until the changes are made.

So far, the roads, drainage facilities and 10 houses have been built in Tres Belle.

There are at least three state and federal grant programs that could be tapped to help the South Fork Homeowners pay to hook up to the county sewer system, said Gary Roderick, the chief of the county's Office of Water Quality.

Eliminating a sewage treatment plant near the South Fork of the St. Lucie River could help efforts to clean up the river.

So far, Martin County has paid about \$60,000 to set up a temporary pumping system that sends wastewater from the South Fork Homeowners sewage plant to the county's sewage plant in Tropical Farms, said county Utilities Director John Polley. And the county sometimes pays to design the new sewer connections and might pick up the extra costs if the project goes over budget.

In addition, the temporary pumping system is saving the South Fork Homeowners about \$25,000 per month, the amount the homeowners were paying to truck the wastewater from the sewage pond to a wastewater treatment facility in Palm Beach County, Polley said.

Michael Townes, president of the Tropical Paradise Homeowners Association, one of three subdivisions served by the South Fork Homeowners Utility Corp., said the developer and the permitting agencies should help solve a problem they allegedly caused.

But a lawsuit is not in the cards because the homeowners could not afford the legal fees, Townes said.

"So, rather than tying it up for years in courts, which we couldn't do anyway, we'd like to see an amiable agreement that would reduce our cost to connect to the county sewer ... to make it affordable and reasonable to us, the little guy," Townes said.

Key Colony Beach won't pay for storm pipes

07/02/2008

Big Pine/Marathon Free Press
Busweiler, Rob

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By Rob Busweiler -Free Press

Residents in Key Colony Beach will continue to have swales placed in their front yards unless they pay the city extra. A motion to have the city pay for perforated storm water pipes was narrowly defeated during a city commission meeting Thursday morning.

As part of the city's plan to upgrade its storm water system, Key Colony Beach is in the process of digging the open drainage systems down its residential streets. The ditches are used to retain storm water in order to prevent it from flowing out into the ocean. Swales are considered an eyesore by several residents, and they asked the city to instead pay extra to use a buried perforated pipe system that leaves the ground level. Crews are currently working in the 10th Street area, and will be headed to 9th Street next. Vorick said a recently passed bill at the state level will require the Keys to be compliant with upgraded storm water technologies by 2025.

"I really was surprised at the visual impact," Commissioner Geraldine Zahn said of the swales.

John and Susuan De Neale, who live on 10th Street, said they expected more out of Key Colony Beach.

"We chose to live in Key Colony Beach for a reason," John said. He and his wife have been in the process of sending out e-mails to neighbors in order to drum up support for the project. They fell one vote short of having the city pay for the project, however. City Commissioner Jeff Vorick's motion to have the city pay for the upgrades received a second from Zahn, but not the necessary third vote for passage.

"You can't change the rules mid-stream," Commissioner Rusty Stevens said.

Since 1994, the city has required that any new homes built in Key Colony Beach include a swale in their plans, which amounts to more than 200 properties.

"How can that be fair," Mayor Ron Sutton said. "We have done certain areas in our city where there are swales."

Sutton also indicated that in conversations with property owners on 10th Street, he has found that several are already willing to pay for the pipe out of their own pockets.

"We received checks already," Sutton said. "If you want the pipe you will have to pay for it."

The upgrade will cost the average property owner about \$300. The city currently is using a grant from the South Florida Water Management District to help fund the project.

Farms' water-saving practices can help homeowners be more efficient

07/02/2008

Tallahassee Democrat

Hodges, Dave

By Dave Hodges-DEMOCRAT

LIVE OAK Proven practices that enabled farmers to curb water consumption and reduce pollution have additional application for others, including Florida's homeowners, a top official with the U.S. Department of Agriculture said Tuesday.

While farmers have been traditionally considered the stewards of the land and work to preserve resources, the need for wise water use is everyone's concern, said Gale A. Buchanan, the USDA's undersecretary for research, education and economics, during an afternoon press conference.

"This is something that everybody's got a stake in," said Buchanan, the USDA's chief scientist. "The environment is not something that's just for a certain group of people. The environment is for all of us."

Buchanan, Florida Farm Bureau President John Hoblick and Florida Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson visited the Suwannee River Water Management District as part of the events Tuesday to recognize the efforts of North Florida farmers who have reduced their water usage by 1 billion gallons a year based on changes in their operations.

Federal and state officials honored 29 farms from Jefferson, Madison, Lafayette, Hamilton and Suwannee counties that participate in the program CARES the County Alliance for Responsible Environmental Stewardship.

CARES was developed by the Suwannee River Partnership and Florida Farm Bureau to promote the efforts of area farmers and ranchers in sustainable farming practices that conserve energy, save water and prevent pollution.

Bronson noted that the application of the farming best management practices is spreading to other parts of the state, including the Santa Fe River basin and the Lake Okeechobee basin. "It's beginning to pay off simply because people are understanding that you don't have to put as much water down and put as much fertilizer down and and you can still get results," Bronson said. He attributed some of that to university research that has identified plant varieties and new turf grasses that don't need as much irrigation and are more drought tolerant.

Crist vetoes controversial sea grass bill

07/02/2008

News-Press

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Governor says measure jeopardizes marine life
By Jim Ash • news-press.

TALLAHASSEE - Calling it constitutionally questionable and potentially devastating to the state's marine ecology, Gov. Charlie Crist kept his promise late Monday to veto a sea grass bill.

Environmentalists originally supported the measure because it called for a \$1,000 fine for careless boaters who rip up beds of the marine plants that hold down the substrate, filter water and feed and shelter countless marine organisms.

But they abruptly changed course, and flooded Crist's office with angry letters and e-mails, after they discovered an amendment by Rep. Will Kendrick, R-Carrabelle, that critics say would have promoted wholesale sea grass destruction.

The stakes were high. In the 1950s, there were more than 5 million acres of sea grasses along Florida's coast. That was whittled to 2 million by 2000 -and it continues to decline at the rate of 82 acres a day.

Kendrick's call for a sea grass mitigation program on state-owned lands would have allowed government agencies and developers to trade sea grass destruction in one area for restoration in another.

Environmentalists complained that they were snookered when Kendrick added the mitigation amendment to the bill at a House Policy & Budget Council meeting on April 15, after an exhausting agenda.

Kendrick's explanation of the amendment lasted only a few seconds.

"That just further clarifies sea grasses that's intended for protection," Kendrick told the council members at the time.

Kendrick later said that his amendment was available for all to read at the committee meeting before the full House and Senate voted and that he was not trying to deceive anyone.

He said he merely wanted to promote a new technology that a Pinellas County company claims can transplant sea grasses - substrate, roots and all. The company claims that patches could be moved out of high traffic areas and replanted in scarred areas where the beds are dying at an alarming rate.

"Florida's sea grass beds are some of the most productive ecological communities on Earth. They are vital to sustaining populations of fish and other marine life for commercial and recreational fishing. These important ecosystems are too valuable to risk and I feel that this bill creates significant risks and raises constitutional issues that outweigh the positive benefits of the legislation," Crist wrote in his veto message.

"Charlie Crist's decision protects our sea grasses from abuses of developers who want deep-water access across sea grass beds. Obviously, he saw that as a show stopper," said Debra Highsmith, conservation chair of the Greater Charlotte Harbor Sierra Club.

Further development, mining likely in sensitive southeast Lee County area

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Hiraki, Ryan

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by ryan hiraki • news-press.

More mining and development could be coming to an environmentally sensitive southeast Lee County area that provides residents and visitors with drinking water.

A report posted on the county's Web site late Tuesday afternoon means change is likely in this 83,000-acre region, which county commissioners decided to protect 18 years ago to gain state approval of their growth plan.

The area is known as the Density Reduction/Groundwater Resource area.

The report outlines three possible scenarios:

The first leans toward preservation, while allowing more mining and development.

The second has the same amount of development, but a little more mining.

The third favors mining the most, while keeping development the same as in the first two scenarios.

Scenario 1 is recommended, potentially because it manages growth the best.

“Even though the scenarios are a little bit vague, the report is thorough,” said Mary Gibbs, the county's community development director.

The report will be distributed today at a meeting where committee members could discuss it. The county hired Dover, Kohl & Partners to study the area, part of a project that could cost \$1.4 million, but also could resolve conflicts among competing interests in the area.

One interest is mining. The area is one of six regions in the state that provide rock needed for roads and construction.

More mining can occur — mining is allowed, but zoning is not yet approved in about a half dozen cases, the report says. But it should be confined to the Alico Road corridor, where most mines are, even if that means destroying an isolated wetland parcel.

“You'd mine that out in exchange for connectivity with other sensitive lands,” Gibbs said, meaning mining companies would have to provide restoration elsewhere.

Developers would face a similar scenario, one in which compromise is essential.

Suggested is a mix of commercial and residential, often condo and apartments built atop businesses, in several areas.

Two are along State Road 82, near Southwest Florida International Airport and the east end of Corkscrew Road.

The other has no access. It's on the Agripartners property, which made headlines during a Coconut Road interchange controversy. About \$10 million was designated for the interchange shortly after Agripartners president Daniel Aronoff, who could have developed the land if the interchange were built, was involved in a 2005 event that raised \$40,000 for U.S. Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska. Young was the chair of the House Transportation Committee, which decides how road money is spent.

Gibbs said this plan could keep homes from springing up through the area, where one home for every 10 acres is allowed.

Pete Quasius, president of Audubon of Southwest Florida, said, “We have to come up with an appropriate balance to protect our environment, not only wildlife and habitat but our water supply.”

He said there are times to exchange mining and development in one area for restoration in another. "Then there are times when we absolutely must protect a piece of real estate vital to the ecosystem."

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION APPLAUDS FLORIDA FOREVER LEGISL

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla., July 1 -- The Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued the following news release:

Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Secretary Michael W. Sole today applauded Senate Bill 542, legislation signed into law yesterday by Governor Crist relating to land acquisition and management.

"I applaud Governor Crist and the Florida Legislature for their leadership and commitment to Florida's environment, recognizing the importance of our landmark land preservation program," said DEP Secretary Michael W. Sole. "Acquiring environmentally-sensitive lands is conserving diverse natural habitats, protecting lands for recreation and preserving natural and historical resources."

Senate Bill 542, sponsored by Representative Stan Mayfield and Senator Burt Saunders, extends the state's premier land acquisition program, Florida Forever, for another decade. The law builds upon the successful conservation program by improving land management activities, increasing monitoring and reporting requirements and encouraging and accelerating public recreational access on state-owned lands.

"Thanks to the support of stakeholders, particularly the Florida Forever Coalition, the nation's largest land acquisition program will continue the important work of protecting the best of Florida's natural resource lands and recreational opportunities for future generations," said DEP Deputy Secretary for Land and Recreation Bob Ballard. "Through Florida Forever, we are preserving vital habitat for threatened and endangered species and providing unmatched opportunities for education and recreation in our state's natural environment."

Originally established in 1999, the 10-year, \$3 billion Florida Forever program is the largest land-buying initiative in the nation, conserving environmentally sensitive land, restoring water resources and preserving important cultural and historical sites. More than two million acres throughout the state have been placed in public ownership under Florida Forever and its predecessor program, Preservation 2000 (P2000).

For more information on the Florida Forever program, visit <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/lands/acquisition/FloridaForever/>.

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Biotech plans mapped out for Briger tract

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Clough, Alexandra

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It's Scripps: The sequel. and a private landowner are putting the final touches to a blueprint for developing 683 acres, the second phase of biotech construction surrounding Scripps Florida.

The so-called Briger tract is vacant land across Donald Ross Road from Florida Atlantic University, home of The Scripps Research Institute's first labs in Florida.

Plans for the Briger tract have been in the works 'since the day after we picked Scripps to be at Jupiter,' Commissioner Karen Marcus said.

But details of the plans have not been made public.

The blueprint calls for 2,700 homes and 4.5 million square feet of commercial space, with 1.6 million square feet set aside for Scripps and 2.4 million available for other biotech companies.

The county and the Lester family, which owns the Briger property, aim to jointly submit a development of regional impact (DRI) plan to state officials in September, said Shannon LaRocque, an assistant county administrator. While it will not be involved in the actual development, the county is helping to shepherd the project through the regulatory process. Along the way, the county and the Lester family will split the tab for planners, engineers and architects, LaRocque said.

A large biotech center near Scripps' labs could create the sort of research hub that first attracted Scripps to Palm Beach County. In 2003, former Gov. Jeb Bush recruited the San Diego-based research institute to Florida, and Scripps officials decided to come to Palm Beach County because they envisioned a massive campus at Mecca Farms in northwestern Palm Beach County.

Environmental concerns killed the Mecca Farms deal, leading Scripps to opt for space at FAU. 'They were to get 2 million square feet at Mecca Farms,' LaRocque said. 'This will give them their 2 million square feet.' It should also lay to rest criticism that the FAU site could not accommodate what then-Gov. Jeb Bush believed would be needed to create a cluster. 'Of the 8 million square feet the governor was looking for, there's 4 million of it right across the street,' Marcus said. Last week, representatives from Palm Beach County, and various agencies met with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, the first step in the council's regulatory review of the development. Natalie Wong, a planner, said it is too early to gauge the project's effect on traffic, but a likely concern for Gardens residents is the thousands of vehicle trips generated by 2,700 homes and the nearby offices.

Noting that the entire county has less than 40 million square feet of offices, commercial real estate broker Neil Merin wondered if demand for 4 million square feet of space will emerge and if it does, what sort of traffic jams would result. 'It would mean that you're concentrating in one small area a fantastically large amount of space,' Merin said. 'It's a lot of commercial space to put on one corner. It's going to cause some very unpleasant traffic impacts.' Marcus, however, expressed confidence that much of the daytime traffic can be contained on the site. Restaurants, for instance, would keep workers in the commercial hub of the development at lunch.

Another issue expected to be scrutinized is the fate of wetlands on the Briger parcel. Joanne Davis, a local environmentalist considered instrumental in defeating the county's efforts to bring Scripps to Mecca Farms, said a challenge to development at Briger isn't likely especially since builders affecting wetlands will be required to offset environmental damage. 'We fought a bitter battle' at Mecca, Davis said. 'You

have to compromise something. I can't see us speaking up on this one.' Palm Beach Gardens Mayor Eric Jablin likewise sees little to oppose in the county's proposal. 'We've been looking forward to this for a long time.' Staff writer Jeff Ostrowski contributed to this story.

