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**Questions Dog U.S. Sugar Deal**

09/08/2008  
Tampa Tribune  
Peterson, Lindsay

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More than two months after the state announced plans to buy out U.S. Sugar, congressmen are becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of information they're getting on the deal, and they're warning that the deal could do more harm than good to the Everglades region.

The state plans to give \$1.7 billion to U.S. Sugar for 187,000 acres on the edge of Lake Okeechobee. Water officials would use the land to create reservoirs to store and clean the polluted lake water before channeling it into the Everglades.

Environmentalists who have worked for decades to restore the Everglades cheered the deal as a way to finally revive the dying "river of grass." But members of Congress were wary, and as time passes, their questions multiply.

"What will this cost? Will this work?" U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-

Palm Beach Gardens, asked at a recent community meeting in Clewiston, where U.S. Sugar is based and which stands to lose its primary source of jobs.

"We're asking the questions, but what's so frustrating is state officials negotiating the deal don't have any answers," said U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Bartow.

"There is no master plan ... to assist in the transition of this community," he said last week. "No questions are being answered about the impact on the overall restoration plan."

Said Mahoney: "You can't put a company out of business with a half-baked plan."

Also, Reps. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, and Allen Boyd, D-Monticello, sent a four-page list of questions to state Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole about six weeks ago. Among them: "What is the precise mission of this land acquisition deal?" and "What are the long-term operation and maintenance costs of implementing this deal?"

The secretary has yet to respond. The South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar are still working out the details of their deal. The environmental department is working with the water district on the congressmen's questions and will send out answers as soon as possible, said environmental department spokeswoman Dee Ann Miller.

#### The Issue Of Federal Money

Neither Congress nor the federal government can stop the deal, but they can withhold federal money the state is counting on to complete restoration plans under way.

The latest effort, approved by Congress in 2000, calls for the state and federal governments to share the cost of building reservoirs to catch stormwater runoff and rerouting the treated water into the Everglades.

After failing for years to deliver its part, Congress approved a major water bill last year, over President Bush's opposition. It's now in a position to spend money on the Everglades, but the U.S. Sugar deal could upset that momentum, Mahoney said at the Clewiston meeting on Aug. 28.

"If Tallahassee thinks it will do this deal and the federal government will run in with a bunch of money, whoa," Mahoney said.

The state isn't asking for federal money for the U.S. Sugar purchase. The water management district plans to raise the money using property taxes and issuing bond-like certificates. But the district likely will need federal money to carry out parts of the new restoration plan, whatever it is.

Hastings aide David Goldenberg said there's a danger that congressional opponents of Everglades funding could use this change of plans to renew and strengthen their opposition.

"People are still pushing" to provide funds, Goldenberg said. "But a lot of people, sadly, would prefer that Congress not fund Everglades restoration and this could provide them with the

excuse they're looking for."

Eric Draper, of the Audubon Society of Florida, said he didn't blame members of Congress for being upset about not being part of the planning for the U.S. Sugar deal. "But money going into this is state and South Florida water management district money," he said.

"The federal government needs to concern itself with the part of the restoration they have not done," he said. It's responsible for a long overdue project to rebuild sections of Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41) across the Everglades, where the highway blocks the flow of water south.

"I would hope they wouldn't hold Tamiami Trail funding hostage," Draper said. "That would be harming the Everglades in order to make a political point."

He's excited by the U.S. Sugar purchase and understands the need for secrecy while officials work out the details. In addition to the land, the deal would include the company's sugar mill, short-line railroad and citrus operation.

State water officials say they need about 100,000 acres to create reservoirs to trap and treat the water from Lake Okeechobee, which has been polluted by urban and suburban stormwater runoff from Central Florida and the farms around the lake.

'Why Are You Buying This Land?'

According to plans described when the deal was announced, the state also would need a broad pathway for the water to flow from the reservoirs south into the Everglades. But that would require a land purchase or swap with another major sugar company that owns property near the lake, Florida Crystals, owned by the Fajul family of Palm Beach.

"The fundamental question is 'Why are you buying this land?'" Putnam said. "If you are buying it to create a flow way, then what are you going to do about Florida Crystals?"

Putnam is also asking whether this is the best way to help clean up the lake. If the state and South Florida Water Management District have nearly \$2 billion to spend on restoration, he asked, is giving it to U.S. Sugar the most efficient way to use that money?

Draper thinks it is, and he said the state can achieve its goals without buying any land from Florida Crystals. It could channel water to the south through canals, he said.

"If the state has to deal with Florida Crystals, it will drive up the cost of the project," he said. "They are like the highwaymen on the bridge. ... They will ask for too much money."

Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens said the company knew little about the U.S. Sugar deal before it was announced and wants only what is fair. It recently has talked to state officials about selling or swapping property, but they haven't discussed anything substantive, agreeing to wait until the purchase negotiations with U.S. Sugar are finished.

Florida Crystals representatives have attended community

meetings in the area, where concerned U.S. Sugar workers and others who depend on its jobs ask about what will become of their towns if U.S. Sugar shuts down. The preliminary deal with the state would allow the company to continue operating for six years.

"America needs agriculture today. We are going to fight to protect it," Mahoney said at the Clewiston meeting.

"What is the effect of taking tens of thousands of acres out of production?" he asked. "The people of the state of Florida have a right to know before anything is signed. I want to believe the deal can happen, but if the state wants to move forward without crossing the i's and dotting the t's, I'm going to fight it."

Reporter Lindsay Peterson can be reached at (813) 259-7834 or [lpeterson@tampatrib.com](mailto:lpeterson@tampatrib.com).

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## Questions Dog U.S. Sugar Deal

09/08/2008

Calibre MacroWorld

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Sep. 8--More than two months after the state announced plans to buy out U.S. Sugar, congressmen are becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of information they're getting on the deal, and they're warning that the deal could do more harm than good to the Everglades region.

The state plans to give \$1.7 billion to U.S. Sugar for 187,000 acres on the edge of Lake Okeechobee. Water officials would use the land to create reservoirs to store and clean the polluted lake water before channeling it into the Everglades.

Environmentalists who have worked for decades to restore the Everglades cheered the deal as a way to finally revive the dying 'river of grass.' But members of Congress were wary, and as time passes, their questions multiply. 'What will this cost? Will this work?' U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, asked at a recent community meeting in Clewiston, where U.S. Sugar is based and which stands to lose its primary source of jobs. 'We're asking the questions, but what's so frustrating is state officials negotiating the deal don't have any answers,' said U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Bartow. 'There is no master plan ... to assist in the transition of this community,' he said last week. 'No questions are being answered about the impact on the overall restoration plan.' Said Mahoney: 'You can't put a company out of business with a half-baked plan.' Also, Reps. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, and Allen Boyd, D-Monticello, sent a four-page list of questions to state Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole about six weeks ago. Among them: 'What is the precise mission of this land acquisition deal?' and 'What are the long-term operation and maintenance costs of implementing this deal?' The secretary has yet to respond. The South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar are still working out the details of their deal. The environmental department is working with the water district on the congressmen's questions and will

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Hastings aide David Goldenberg said there's a danger that congressional opponents of Everglades funding could use this change of plans to renew and strengthen their opposition. 'People are still pushing' to provide funds, Goldenberg said. 'But a lot of people, sadly, would prefer that Congress not fund Everglades restoration and this could provide them with the excuse they're looking for.' Eric Draper, of the Audubon Society of Florida, said he didn't blame members of Congress for being upset about not being part of the planning for the U.S. Sugar deal. 'But money going into this is state and South Florida water management district money,' he said. 'The federal government needs to concern itself with the part of the restoration they have not done,' he said. It's responsible for a long overdue project to rebuild sections of Tamiami Trail (U.S. Highway 41) across the Everglades, where the highway blocks the flow of water south. 'I would hope they wouldn't hold Tamiami Trail funding hostage,' Draper said. 'That would be harming the Everglades in order to make a political point.' He's excited by the U.S. Sugar purchase and understands the need for secrecy while officials work out the details. In addition to the land, the deal would include the company's sugar mill, short-line railroad and citrus operation.

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are you buying this land?" Putnam said. 'If you are buying it to create a flow way, then what are you going to do about Florida Crystals?' Putnam is also asking whether this is the best way to help clean up the lake. If the state and South Florida Water Management District have nearly \$2 billion to spend on restoration, he asked, is giving it to U.S. Sugar the most efficient way to use that money?

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## **Editorial Will history repeat itself with devastation of St. Lucie River?**

09/07/2008

Jupiter Courier

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Water from Lake Okeechobee began flowing east, again, Thursday morning.

Residents of Martin and St. Lucie counties are holding their collective breath - and for good reason. What it will bring, and how it will impact the St. Lucie River, will be revealed in the days, weeks and months to come. However, the sense of impending doom river-watchers are feeling right now is more than justified.

The massive release of nitrogen- and phosphorus-tainted water caused two ecological crises in the St. Lucie River in the past 10 years. Dozens of species of fish developed nasty lesions following discharges from the lake in 1998. In 2005 the South Fork of the St. Lucie River turned green when an algae bloom, triggered by discharges from Lake O, choked oxygen from the estuary.

Is the St. Lucie River about to be ravaged again? It's a fair - and disturbing - question. In the past few weeks our region went from being parched by an historic drought to being inundated by a deluge (Tropical Storm Fay) that one official with the Army Corps of Engineers labeled 'in excess of a once-in-a-100-year event.' Incredibly, the water level of Lake Okeechobee rose 3.26 feet in 14 days - from 11.34 feet on Aug. 19 to 14.6 feet on Sept. 2.

The water level has to be lowered when it reaches or exceeds safe, acceptable levels - between 12.5 feet and 15.5 feet - because the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding Lake O constitutes 'a grave and imminent danger to human life,' based on a May 2006 report commissioned by the South Florida Water Management District.

And the water in the lake can only be discharged to the east - into the St. Lucie River - and west - into the Caloosahatchee River - because proposed flow-ways south of the lake and other water-holding areas have not yet been built. There is no remedy despite the state accelerating funding of construction that would create more room for excess lake water to be stored.

Federal funding for both the dike, the flow-way and water-storage projects has been woefully inadequate and painfully slow to materialize. In addition, political infighting between state and federal agencies has severely delayed efforts to rectify both problems. The latest - and best - hope for the flow-way may lie with the state's tentative deal to purchase 187,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar in the Everglades Agricultural Area. But even if this deal is consummated, it will be another seven to 10 years before large volumes of water begin flowing south of Lake O instead of east and west.

The bottom-line? Residents in Martin and St. Lucie counties will cross their fingers and hope history doesn't repeat itself. Once again, the vagaries of Mother Nature have exposed the failures of elected and appointed officials - at all levels of government - to remedy one of the biggest environmental problems confronting our region.

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## What Lake Okeechobee's up-and-down levels mean for you

09/07/2008

Miami Herald - Online

CURTIS MORGAN

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A quick recap of Lake Okeechobee's annual water levels, starting in 2000: Too high. Way too low. Just right. Just right. Too high. Way too high. Too low. Way too low.

Which brings us to 2008, a year in which the lake has been way too low until three weeks ago, when Tropical Storm Fay put things right -- if only for the moment.

Hurricane Ike or another storm could quickly push water too high again, potentially endangering the lake's aging earthen levee. That's why federal engineers began draining it last week.

Anyone see a pattern here?

Is the largest and most important piece of a water supply network that serves five million people supposed to go up and down like a roller coaster?

Not exactly, but it often has.

The vast lake naturally rises with wet and dry seasons, and sharp swings mark 77 years of record-keeping. But the swings have grown more extreme in the last decade, reflecting both South Florida's drought-to-deluge weather and the increasing limitations of an antiquated, overtaxed water management system.

The agencies in charge of the lake -- the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in consultation with the South Florida Water Management District -- haven't always make the right calls, either, but they've got limited power. They control floodgates, not floods.

Here are answers to frequently asked questions about confusing Lake O:

Q: All we've heard about for years are low lake levels. Now, they're suddenly draining water? What happened?

A: "It was an extreme event following an extreme event," said Andrew Geller, a hydraulic engineer with the Corps' Jacksonville district.

For a lake wallowing in historic lows, largely as a result of a two-year drought, Fay provided an equally historic reversal. Though meek wind-wise, the Corps rates the surprising storm a once-in-a-100-years or more rainmaker.

More critically, it camped over the Kissimmee River basin -- a 5,600-square-mile funnel spilling into the 730-square-mile lake.

The basin's "only outlet is to Lake Okeechobee," said Chip Merriam, district deputy executive director. For water managers,

the rough rule of thumb is that an inch of rain across the Kissimmee River will raise the lake three inches. Fay dropped seven to 10 inches, feeding the fastest weekly rise ever.

Lake Okeechobee now sits a half-foot above its historic average, approaching 15 feet above sea level.

Q: Now that the lake is back to normal, they've got to lift those irritating watering restrictions, right?

A: Sorry.

The twice-weekly water restrictions not only remain in Miami-Dade, Broward, Monroe and much of Palm Beach counties, but water managers still plan to make them permanent before year's end.

Merriam said the seesaw lake only underlines how quickly conditions change in a region where regular droughts and tropical tempests skew the concept of "average" rainfall. The restrictions, he said, aren't intended simply to ensure drinking water but to protect the Everglades, Florida Bay, coastal estuaries and the marshes of Lake Okeechobee from damaging dry-downs. Besides, he said "irrigating your lawn five or seven days a week when it's raining out is just wasting water. It doesn't benefit anybody."

Q: Why does the lake matter in Miami-Dade and Broward, which draw from the underground Biscayne Aquifer?

A: In the 1950s and '60s, the Corps built canals, pumps and flood gates across South Florida and pretty much converted vast, marsh-lined Lake Okeechobee into a combination storm sewer and water barrel.

Sprawling suburbs still rely on all that old plumbing.

Surrounding rural towns and the state's sugar industry pump directly from Lake O, but coastal cities to the south also dip in from time to time. Water managers can ration water out through 1,900 miles of canals to recharge the Biscayne Aquifer when droughts or municipal wells suck groundwater too dry -- a practice reduced in recent years because the lake water is too polluted for the pristine Everglades.

Q: If the lake is near its historic average, why drain it?

A: That history includes years when water was stacked high for farms and cities, sometimes near 18 feet -- a point when aquatic plants die under dark, deep water.

Environmental concerns, along with worries about the aging levee, make the past no longer such a good gauge.

The levee is massive -- 200 feet wide and up to 45 feet high -- but it was built more than 70 years ago out of dredged-up sand, shell and muck. The pressure of high water can seep in and eat at its insides, springing leaks and threatening potentially far more serious collapses.

In April, the Corps adopted a new range for the lake, between 12.5 and 15.5 feet -- calling that the optimal zone for balancing its competing demands as a reservoir, storm-runoff basin and renowned fishing destination while also protecting that dicey dike.

The trade off: The peak water of the old days has been lowered more than a foot.

So while the lake now sits only six inches from its historic average, it's actually higher than the Corps wants it -- particularly with storms still spinning toward South Florida. The releases that started last week aim only to slow the rise, not draw down the lake.

Q: Didn't the drain-the-lake move backfire last time?

A: Big time. After bad hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005 pushed the lake near 18 feet, the Corps -- facing forecasts of another scary season -- started dumping gallons early.

Instead, the 2006 season fizzled, the region got soaked by a two-year drought and coastal estuaries on both sides of the lake exploded in algae blooms from the surge of dirty lake water. By July 2007, the lake hit an all-time low.

Some critics say the Corps blew it, draining a foot or so of water from the lake that might have averted the water restrictions. Regional water managers say the restrictions would have been imposed anyway.

The Corps, said Geller, has to put public safety first.

"You could Monday morning quarterback any decision," he said. "We went to a historic low. But if we didn't do those releases, where would we be now?"

Maybe staring at Ike with a smaller safety margin for the levee.

Q: Why can't they send more lake water to the Everglades, which supposedly needs it, instead of trashing rivers with too much of it?

A: Two reasons: Pollution and lawsuits.

So much farm and pasture runoff has flowed into the lake over the decades that, even at its cleanest, it's seven times too polluted for the Everglades. The one massive treatment marsh built to clean lake water can only handle so much without running afoul of water quality standards monitored closely under state law and by a federal judge.

Until long-delayed Everglades restoration projects move forward -- or the state pulls off its deal to buy sugar fields and turn them into cleanup marshes and reservoirs -- the often-hammered Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers will likely remain the lake's main relief valves by default.

Q: Why didn't they just fix the levee while the lake was low for two years?

A: They've started. But there's a long way to go and a long time to wait.

Under the current schedule, the Corps' nearly \$1 billion plan to shore up the 143-mile-long levee won't be done until 2030.

Why so long? Ponderous Corps processes don't make for

streamlined construction, but Congress has not given the orders -- or money -- to get it done any faster.

The Corps aims to reinforce the most vulnerable stretch -- 22.4 miles from Port Mayaca to Belle Glade -- by 2013. So far, contractors have completed 4,000 feet.

Q: Does that mean we need to worry about the levee?

A: Not for now, the Corps insists.

Even with a glance from Tropical Storm Hanna likely to nudge waters up, the levee has lots of capacity and a large safety margin, said Stephen Duba, chief of engineering for the Corps in Florida.

"We could probably handle multiple hurricanes now," Duba said.

Though powerful hurricanes can slosh waves 10 feet up the earthen levee walls, the dike is so tall and thick, it can weather the assault -- as long as the lake remains below 17.25 feet, he said.

At 18 feet, the Corps considers the risk of leaks serious, and those risks rise with the water. At 21 feet, a breach is almost certain.

While the Corps professes no concerns about dike failure, engineers have opened the big gates at either side to start a slow draining. "We're being conservative," Duba said.

As Fay vividly showed, Lake O can go up much faster than down -- by the Corps' own estimates, as much as six times faster. Even at "max discharge," with every gate and outlet wide open, the Corps can drop the lake only about one foot in two weeks. Evaporation alone can do about the same thing.

"A typical hurricane moving along at 15 or 16 miles per hour is not a problem," Duba said. "It's a slow moving tropical storm like Fay that gets us excited." ONE WEEK IT'S TOO LOW, THEN TOO HIGH, BUT WHY? SOME ANSWERS ON LAKE OKEECHOBEE

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## **Ed Killer Officials being forced to open Lake Okeechobee floodgates**

09/07/2008

Jupiter Courier

Ed Killer

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As everyone on the Treasure Coast is well aware, we are soggy. The grass is still squishy pretty much everywhere you go.

And just about every ditch, creek, canal and river - no matter how big or small - is draining. A lot of it is 'going to tide,' as South Florida Water Management District governing board member Patrick Rooney put it in a guest column in Saturday's Scripps Newspapers.

So that's the water dynamics of South Florida. The majority of it is low, swampy land with anywhere from 50 to 80 inches of rainfall a year.

What rainwater doesn't stand, flows somewhere - into marshes, into lakes, into the aquifer below ground - or into a tributary that carries it through an estuary and eventually out to sea.

But how much of it is moving is really staggering. And how much of it is going to tide makes one wonder how much the coastal ecology can take before it finally surrenders for good.

Thursday, the Army Corps of Engineers initiated the start of pulse releases out of Lake Okeechobee and into the St. Lucie River and Caloosahatchee River. The release plan is an 11-day cycle that is scheduled to end a week from today.

The purpose is to reduce the rate of rise of Lake Okeechobee. Sunday, the lake level reached 15 feet for the first time since the spring of 2006. Water is still flowing into the lake from the Kissimmee River basin.

Good for now. But if another storm like Fay drags across Central Florida, the gates at Port Mayaca and Moore Haven will be thrown wide open. They have to. The Corps has no other place to put the water.

And that's the problem. The Corps has told us that the Herbert Hoover Dike is at risk of failure if the lake's water level gets higher than 17.25 feet for an extended period of time.

At its max this week, the floodgates at the St. Lucie Lock in Tropical Farms will let out a planned 1,700- to 1,800-cubic feet per second. I know that means nothing to anyone, so let's put that in perspective.

At 1,800 cfs, that is 13,464 gallons per second of 'fresh' water flowing into the river. Over the course of a day, that runs 1.16 billion gallons.

No one living east of Indiantown is happy about this. And those who have been here since before the massive lake discharges of 1998 know the Corps is capable of dumping a lot more water.

Following the hurricanes of 2004, the lake climbed to 18.02 feet. Subsequently, massive discharges followed as water was dumped through the St. Lucie Canal to the east and the Caloosahatchee River to the west.

According to data compiled by Bob Voisinet, coordinator of Florida Oceanographic's water quality team, in 2004 and 2005, 190 billion gallons and 304 billion gallons, respectively were discharged from the lake into the St. Lucie.

Twice that went west into the Caloosahatchee River.

We need to buy that land from U.S. Sugar. Now. And we need to forego studies and simply start making it into a water moving conduit that takes the pressure off the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee - two rivers that Mother Nature never intended to receive Central Florida's runoff. Ed Killer can be reached at [edward.killer@scripps.com](mailto:edward.killer@scripps.com) or (772) 221-4201.

