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Agriculture questions U.S. Sugar deal

09/09/2008
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Backlash from Florida's farming community keeps growing over the state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp. to make way for Everglades restoration.

A postcard campaign launched over the weekend targets Gov. Charlie Crist, imploring the governor who helped broker the deal to meet with Glades area farmers, businesses and residents worried about the economic results of losing U.S. Sugar.

"We do not want to be sacrificed in the name of Everglades Restoration!" read the 7,000 pre-printed postcards organizers are distributing with the hope that they end up in the governor's mailbox.

In addition, the chairman of the state Senate's agricultural committee is questioning how the South Florida Water Management District can afford the buyout while also paying for other long-promised Everglades projects and addressing the job losses expected from losing U.S. Sugar.

Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Winter Haven, is chairman of a Senate appropriations committee the district answers to about how it spends taxpayers' money. In Alexander's Sept. 3 letter to the district he warned: "It is essential that the financial and economic impacts of this acquisition be thoroughly reviewed ... to ensure this action benefits the citizens of the state."

Glades communities have called for the district and governor to commit to keeping as much land as possible in agricultural production and to provide land and money to attract new businesses. They also called for keeping U.S. Sugar's mill and citrus plant operating after the deal is done.

"We don't know what we are going to be left with ... We need to be heard," said Ardis Hammock, one of the organizers of the campaign.

Crist on June 24 announced the landmark deal to put U.S. Sugar out of business over the next six years and use the company's 187,000 acres to help restore flows of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Since then, the district and U.S. Sugar have been negotiating the details of a contract, due this month, to spell out the final cost and how to pay for it.

The district proposes borrowing the money for the deal, and paying off the debt with property taxes from 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys.

But that financing method was once intended for other Lake Okeechobee and Everglades restoration projects. Alexander, a citrus grower who represents several of the counties around Lake Okeechobee, questions how the district will meet all those financial obligations.

"It doesn't leave us any room to build the reservoirs and storm-water treatment areas necessary to implement a plan that is going to make a major difference," Alexander said Monday.

Because of the U.S. Sugar deal, district officials are considering delaying or scaling back some restoration projects while also

seeking more federal money.

The district's board will get an update Wednesday on the proposed U.S. Sugar deal, intended to close by Nov. 30.

Crist's economic development staff is meeting with leaders in areas affected by the U.S. Sugar deal to explore alternatives to protect and attract jobs, Crist spokesman Sterling Ivey said.

Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

Agriculture questions U.S. Sugar deal Postcard protest targets proposed \$1.75 billion deal

09/09/2008

Calibre MacroWorld

Andy Reid

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Sep. 9--Backlash from Florida's farming community keeps growing over the state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp. to make way for Everglades restoration.

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Everglades, then port

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commissioners have no reason today to give Florida Crystals a head start on converting land in the middle of the Everglades into an industrial center. And the South Florida Water Management District, which may pay \$1.75 billion for U.S. Sugar, has no reason to encourage the idea. Before grants any favorable land-use changes, the water district must decide where it will store and treat water to restore the Everglades. That trumps all. Florida Crystals wants a commitment that its land would be the best place for an inland port, receiving cargo that arrives by ship and sending it along by road or rail. That commitment would come in land-use changes that wouldn't be finalized until next year. It would be a short cut for the West Palm Beach-based sugar grower, but there's no hurry. Florida Crystals' land is in the path of Everglades restoration. The district hasn't even completed the deal with U.S. Sugar, and the engineering to determine where the water would flow hasn't been done. Granting Florida Crystals industrial rights now would raise the value of land that might be flooded later.

Residents of Glades communities will argue that the commission must act now to replace jobs that will disappear if the water district board approves the U.S. Sugar sale. But no one has determined that an inland port even can succeed, much less determined the best location. Further, Florida Crystals is asking to redesignate 9,000 acres, far more than the port would need.

The water district must deal with Florida Crystals on land trades, to keep some U.S. Sugar land in farming and let water flow easily. But to concede Florida Crystals such an important point and support an industrial center before engineering studies are done would weaken the district in negotiations with the sugar grower. Until it is known where the water will go, should not decide where an inland port would go.

Farmers concerned about U.S. Sugar buyout

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'We have time ... The deal has not been finalized yet,' Ivey said.

Alexander wants Glades funds justification

09/08/2008

Lakeland Ledger

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State Sen. J.D.Alexander, who recently wrote Gov. Charlie Crist questioning the long-range economic impact of the previously announced deal with U.S. Sugar, has now turned his attention to the South Florida Water Management District's budget.

He's invoking FS 373.536 to seek and, more importantly, to receive answers from water managers about some issues that need to be answered before water officials approve their budget this month.

Alexander's specific questions are :

1. How will the acquisition impact the district's ability to meet current resource needs and project schedules?
2. What are the impacts to the district's efforts in reducing nutrient loading to Lake Okeechobee, specifically related to the Kissimmee River watershed?
3. What input has been received from the federal government concerning the potential acquisition and the impacts to our CERP (Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan) partnership?
4. What is the debt service analysis and long-term financial outlook?
5. What studies or efforts have been undertaken to determine the economic impact of this acquisition to the regions for related job losses?

The last question was at the heart of his letter to Crist.

No one expected this plan to be easy. This is one reason why that is so.

