### U.S. Sugar Stories for December 30

**Subject:** U.S. Sugar Stories for December 30

**Compiled by:** South Florida Water Management District  
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**Contract Vote Will Preserve Glades**

12/30/08  
Ledger, The
By CHARLIE CRIST

Published: Tuesday, December 30, 2008 at 12:01 a.m.
Last Modified: Monday, December 29, 2008 at 10:50 p.m.

This month, we took a historic, monumental step toward reviving, restoring and preserving one of America's greatest natural treasures - the Everglades. The governing board of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board approved a $1.34 billion contract to purchase a vast tract of land needed to restore the River of Grass and create unprecedented possibilities for our environment and our economy.

This acquisition, when completed, will provide the "missing link" connecting Lake Okeechobee and Everglades National Park through a managed system of water storage and treatment.

The land also will be used to safeguard the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers, and estuaries. I can envision no better gift to the Everglades, to the people of Florida, or to our country - than to place in public ownership this missing link that represents the key to true restoration.

Sixty years ago, President Harry Truman traveled to South Florida to dedicate Everglades National Park. The governing board's decision this month follows in his footsteps - and in the tradition of the great conservationist President Teddy Roosevelt. We continue their legacy of permanent preservation of the one of the most unique landscapes of our country and on the planet.

Any success toward restoring the Everglades hinges on the quantity, quality and the timing of delivery of water. Every Floridian can celebrate this historic vote and its significance in moving us closer toward acquiring the land that will provide the water essential to restoring the Everglades.

My administration is fully committed to making sure that we are making progress toward restoration and protecting our state's rivers, lakes and springs while also meeting public demand for resources.

My administration also is committed to pursuing economic-development opportunities for the communities around Lake Okeechobee. This land acquisition will serve as a catalyst for the diversification of the local economy, and our Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development will work tirelessly with these communities, Enterprise Florida and other agencies to ensure we seize this opportunity to facilitate greater prosperity for the entire region. To begin this dialogue, Dale Brill, executive director of the Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, visited Clewiston on Friday.

I am grateful to the members of the South Florida Water Management District governing board for their support, which came after thoughtful and deliberate consideration. This land contract reflects the courage and tenacity of so many people who, like the late Marjory Stoneman Douglas, have worked to protect this unique environmental treasure that makes our state so special.

We must realize that this land acquisition moves us closer to restoring the Everglades natural flow of water as our Creator
intended. The courage of the governing board cannot be overstated, and its vision and foresight is to be commended by us all. This is a historic time for our Everglades, and I look forward to making this unique resource healthier and more wondrous than ever. It is a gift to present and future generations.

[ Charlie Crist is governor of Florida. ]

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**Karl Wickstrom: Imagine a reserve in the Everglades**

1/30/2008
Stuart News

Karl Wickstrom, guest columnist
Sunday, December 28, 2008

The people of Florida have a truly amazing opportunity.

Purchase 180,000 acres of overdrained and tainted sugar land to restore Mother Nature's long-lost River of Grass.

That's a dream we've nurtured for a half-century.

The deal to buy U.S. Sugar's property will reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, save the estuaries from horrendous discharges, recharge ground-water systems and reduce phosphorous fertilizer pollution by hundreds and hundreds of tons.

Those benefits alone are more than enough to justify the buy, at a price that will be viewed as a can't-miss bargain compared to the public good.

And we'd suggest this icing on the cake:

The River of Grass Restoration Reserve.

This new reserve could transform the immense property (the size of many state parks combined) into a natural wonderland, while at the same time providing vitally needed basic benefits of the "missing link" flowway.

Imagine a network of waterways and marshes offering all kinds of public uses, such as:

- Many miles of canoe and kayak access.
- Nature trails rarely enjoyed anywhere.
- World-class birding, drawing millions.
- Extraordinary freshwater fishing.
- Duck hunting supreme in certain areas.
- Vistas of 'Glades life in large scale.
- Important educational centers.
Lake communities could benefit in many ways. It could be a significant part of a needed economic program to aid folks on the south side of the lake.

The Reserve idea hatched after we visited Guana Reserve just north of St. Augustine. Guana covers 55,000 acres and offers many of the same features we envision for the River of Grass Reserve. Take a look at nerrs.noaa.gov/GTM

It's exciting to think of the possibilities.

First, of course, we must acquire the sugar land.

There are naysayers picking at details of the purchase. The hidden hand of certain agricultural interests is in the background. And some observers worry that U.S. Sugar owners will make an undeserved bundle in the deal.

Actually the price equivalent to $7,000 an acre is something the public can live with, especially considering that there is no real alternative.

The contract closing is slated for next year. Get it done, we say, and tie in a River of Grass Restoration Reserve that would gain worldwide appeal and significance.

Wickstrom is an environmentalist and the founder of Stuart-based Florida Sportsman Magazine. E-mail: kywickstrom@yahoo.com.

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**COMMENTARY: The Everglades' Critical Turning Point**

12/30/2008

E/The Environmental Magazine

COMMENTARY: The Everglades' Critical Turning Point

The historic restoration of the Everglades must get moving now

By Sara Fain

The Florida panther calls the Everglades home, and is one of the most endangered mammals in the world.

© www.nps.gov

The Florida Everglades--America's largest subtropical wilderness--has shrunk to less than half its former size. Wading bird populations in Everglades National Park have plummeted by over 90 percent.

Sixty-eight species of plants and animals, including the Florida panther, American crocodile, wood stork, snail kite, and Cape Sable seaside sparrow are threatened or endangered with extinction. For years now, the Everglades ecosystem and within in it, the first national park established in the U.S. due to its unique biodiversity, have been on life support. The patient is dying.

This well-documented devastation is a result of the federally-mandated Army Corps of Engineers-designed system of 1,400 miles of canals and levees constructed to control flooding and provide...
water supply for South Florida. The water entering the canal system from Lake Okeechobee, polluted with agricultural runoff and high levels of mercury, is pumped down the peninsula and through ocean outfall pipes along the southeast coast, creating an overabundance of nutrients causing algae blooms smothering offshore coral reefs and seagrass beds. Recreational and commercial fisheries continue to decline because fish and crustaceans cannot breed as successfully in the coastal areas along Florida and Biscayne bays.

The Calvary came to the rescue in the form of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), which was passed by Congress in 2000. It was a bold step—the most ambitious ecological restoration program ever undertaken in the history of the world! But during the past eight years, there have been many missteps.

The good news is that on December 9, 2008 the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District voted to endorse an historic agreement to purchase 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation’s land in the Everglades Agricultural Area for restoration.

The Everglades Coalition was in enthusiastic favor of this purchase, as a fundamental flaw in the restoration plan was a lack of land for storing and cleaning water to send south into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay. Due to the tremendous loss of wetlands within the Everglades ecosystem, the system can no longer hold enough water during the wet season to then slowly deliver it further south during the dry season.

Water in the Everglades has been polluted with agricultural runoff and high levels of mercury.

With the fortuitous development of U.S. Sugar unexpectedly offering to sell their land to the state, and South Florida Water Management District’s vote in December 2008 to approve it, the historic restoration of the Everglades must begin now in earnest, and with federal support.

Without the new administration’s backing, broken processes, funding shortfalls, and development pressures will continue to compete with restoration, all while the “Glades” and its inhabitants increasingly decline. A recent report by the National Research Council (NRC), an independent body directed by Congress to review restoration progress, found that, “CERP is bogged down in budgeting, planning, and procedural matters and is making only scant progress toward achieving restoration goals.” Although some projects have begun construction, not one has been completed. Even worse, Congress has not given any funding for construction of CERP projects.

On January 8-11, the Everglades Coalition will hold its 24th annual conference in Miami. Hosted by the National Parks Conservation Association, the open-to-the-public conference will bring together leaders, elected officials, community and environmental activists, and the general public to discuss the opportunities and challenges in 2009 and beyond in efforts to restore this great “Wetland of International Importance.” At the conference the hard work yet to be done will become very clear to all in attendance. Sessions will focus on topics such as growth management, political and public partnerships, endangered and invasive species, wildlife habitat,
energy policies, and water quality. We urge you to join us at the Hilton Miami Downtown to learn more.

In leading the charge, Governor Crist and now the South Florida Water Management District have set a high bar. If their vision for the Everglades is to be successful, the state of Florida needs President-elect Obama and the federal government to sustain their commitment to a strong federal-state partnership.

The world is watching to gauge its success, both politically and ecologically. Will the Everglades—an International Biosphere Reserve, Unesco World Heritage Site, ecosystem found nowhere else on the planet, and place visited by people from all over the world, be rescued in time?

CONTACTS: Everglades Coalition

To have a registration form faxed or mailed to you, contact Pat Carr (954) 942-3113 or patriciacarr@evergladescoalition.org
For registration information, fees, and hotel information, contact Sara Fain, National Parks Conservation Association at 305-546-6689; sfain@npca.org
For event lodging: The Hilton Miami Downtown, (305) 374-0000.

SARA FAIN is national co-chair of the Everglades Coalition and Everglades Restoration program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association.

Official Statement on Florida Crystals' Objections to Bond Validation for U.S. Sugar Deal
12/30/2008
Science Letter

Since Governor Charlie Crist's announcement of the purchase of U.S. Sugar's land for Everglades restoration last June, Florida Crystals has sought to work with the South Florida Water Management District and the Governor's office to ensure the deal would achieve the Governor's environmental objectives, while at the same time being financially sound and protecting sustainable agriculture (see also ).

Unfortunately, the terms of the deal currently proposed by the District not only do not achieve the Governor's goal of creating a connection between the Lake and the Everglades, but are also detrimental to agricultural interests other than United States Sugar Corp. The current deal will jeopardize legitimate and planned projects to improve water quality and flow thereby delaying Everglades restoration for years, and it will put farmers in the EAA at a competitive disadvantage by allowing U.S. Sugar to lease back the land it sells at below market rates and with a right of first refusal.

As a result, Florida Crystals was forced today to file objections in the hearing relating to the validation of the certificates of
participation proposed to be issued by the District to finance the purchase of U.S. Sugar property. The transaction is so substantially different from how it was originally proposed, we must take this action to protect our rights.

While we cannot support the transaction in its current form, Florida Crystals remains supportive of Governor Crist's bold proposal to acquire U.S. Sugar and Florida Crystals stands immediately ready to work with the Governor and the District to enhance the public purpose of this project and bring forward a proposal that is better for the State of Florida, the environment and the taxpayers of the District.

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Mary Barley
Purchase price for U.S. Sugar acreage a bargain
12/30/2008
News-Press

True restoration of America's famed River of Grass was given long overdue hope Dec. 16, when the South Florida Water Management District voted to buy 180,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. This purchase of sugar cane fields will provide critical land for storing, treating and moving water needed for Everglades restoration. The acquisition will lead to clean water for people and nature, not to mention the return of the abundant wildlife that once characterized South Florida.

Like all great land deals this one is not without its critics. But the $1.3 billion purchase price is a bargain when all its benefits are considered.

Everglades restoration has been hindered by the refusal of sugar companies to sell land at a fair price in order to allow additional treatment and storage projects to be built. Now the public can get this land at a reasonable price. In fact, taxpayers will save billions of dollars by not carrying out the former plan, which depended on expensive, piecemeal manipulation of water. How long can Florida afford to simply clean up water polluted by others? Now we can let the water flow from Lake Okeechobee south, getting cleaner rather than dirtier along the way, through a managed system of reservoirs and wetlands.

Removing much of the land now farmed from sugar cane production will reduce runoff from phosphorus saturated soils - runoff that harms wildlife habitat and pollutes the Everglades. The economic benefits that people will enjoy, including enthusiastic tourism coming back to life, a vibrant Lake Okeechobee filled with fish and fowl for the public and our tourists, are alone enough to justify the purchase. Yet, the ultimate benefit of no longer managing our water system primarily for sugar production leaves open the financially smart option of solving South Florida's water supply woes once and for all by using less to irrigate sugar.

People also matter and for too long the communities of the
Everglades Agricultural Area have been held hostage to sugar cane companies. The mayor of Pahokee, an incredibly impoverished area, pleaded recently for freedom from the encirclement of 'Big Sugar,' which has stifled the town's growth and continues to cause misery. Lake communities, really company towns, will need help in the future, when after a seven-year lease, the U.S. Sugar land is finally used for restoration. But those communities now have a new lease on life. They can plan an alternative making use of their most attractive asset - being near the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee.

The communities will benefit also from the construction of infrastructure and projects necessary to re-establish the historic connection between Lake Okeechobee and the fabled River of Grass. The system of storage and treatment projects will provide jobs for years to come. The residents of Glades and Hendry counties and the city of Clewiston also now have the opportunity to pursue economic development including an 'inland port' (an intermodal complex to transport goods).

Before this historic vote, the opportunity and flexibility of storing and cleaning water on such a large scale could not be contemplated. The existing state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, in tandem with the Northern Everglades program championed by Governor Crist in 2007 to restore and protect Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their respective estuaries, can finally be made to work in a way that really works for the communities depending upon clean water and recovered fisheries. The people around Lake Okeechobee deserve nothing less. For too long, they have suffered in relative silence.

This purchase is an opportunity for us all - the citizens of this state, our environment and ultimately our economy. Granted, it requires some daring and adventure and with that comes some fear and doubt. Mostly it requires vision, something woefully lacking before Governor Crist suggested this approach to Everglades restoration.

- Mary Barley is vice chair of the Everglades Foundation.

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Sara Fain: Sugar Deal Renews Hope For the Everglades
12/29/2008
Tallahassee Democrat
Fain, Sara
Sara Fain: Sugar deal renews hope for the Everglades
Sara Fain • My View • December 29, 2008

Buzz up! In recent weeks, we've seen plenty of criticism about the details of the proposed purchase by the South Florida Water Management District of 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land for the benefit of Everglades restoration.

While the deal is not perfect, perhaps the naysayers cannot see the forest for the trees. The very ability to manage water — provide drinking water, prevent flooding and maintain basic ecosystem functions in South Florida — is at stake, and the opportunities made possible by acquiring this land are the key to long-term success or failure.

There is no question that Florida's Everglades are suffering. Every day that we don't move forward on restoration, this intricate ecosystem breaks down a little more.

Over the recent years, South Florida suffered from one of the longest and worst droughts in its history. One result was a raging fire in eastern Everglades National Park, an area constantly starved for water. This fire burned almost 40,000 acres. Peat soil that took thousands of years to accumulate was lost in a single afternoon.

Yet, more recently, Water Conservation Area 3A, north of Everglades National Park, was drowning with dangerously high water levels. These unnatural extremes are devastating not only to the environment, but to our native wildlife, including the Florida panther, American crocodile, wood stork, snail kite, Cape Sable seaside sparrow and coral reefs.

The harm we have witnessed from either too much or not enough water in different parts of the Everglades ecosystem is a stark demonstration of the well-documented, fundamental flaws in our antiquated water management system.

According to a recent report by the National Research Council's Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress, if progress is not made soon on important restoration projects, the Everglades' continuing degradation may, at least in part, become irreversible.

The committee stated: "Ongoing delay in South Florida ecosystem restoration not only has postponed improvements to the hydrological condition but also has allowed ecological decline to continue. . . . Unless near-term progress is achieved on major restoration initiatives . . . the Everglades ecosystem may experience irreversible losses to its character and functioning."

Much has been stated about the high cost of this land purchase. Yet, little attention has been paid to the many benefits that will come from this important investment.

With more than 7 million people already living in South Florida, we've outgrown a water-management system built for fewer than 2 million residents. The new design takes the natural system into account and will be a tremendous improvement. And with the fortuitous U.S. Sugar land acquisition, we'll now have the acreage required to create reservoirs and treatment areas to restore clean water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, reducing
harmful discharges out to our sensitive estuaries.

Tourism will benefit

Millions travel from all over the world to visit the Everglades every year, filling hotels, rental cars, restaurants and other tourist attractions. Recreational use of natural areas and parks by both tourists and residents is one of the most important economic activities in Florida. Research shows that protected lands actually correlate more with greater economic growth than do lands utilized for natural resource exploitation.

Is $1.3 billion too much to save a unique ecosystem that exists nowhere else in the world and has received international recognition for its incredible biodiversity? Is it too much to ensure that we have a clean water supply and economic development for future generations of South Floridians?

The Everglades Coalition of more than 6 million members believes it is not.

When President Truman dedicated Everglades National Park in 1947, he stated: "The benefits our nation will derive from this dedication will outlast the youngest of us. They will increase with the passage of years. Few actions could make a more lasting contribution to the enjoyment of the American people than the establishment of the Everglades National Park."

As Gov. Charlie Crist provides great leadership for the Everglades, we look to the 110th Congress and the Obama administration to renew its commitment to support and fund the restoration plan. Only with a strong federal-state partnership can we truly achieve our goals.

There's still plenty of work to be done to get there. During the 24th annual Everglades Coalition Conference in Miami on Jan. 9, a key session titled "Restoration after the Sugar Deal" will explore some of the issues we will face. Experts will discuss Everglades restoration as it pertains to growth management, political and public partnerships, endangered and invasive species, wildlife habitat, energy policies and water quality.

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**Shy, rich farmers thrust in spotlight as players in U.S. Sugar deal**

12/29/2008
Palm Beach Post - Online
Salisbury, Susan
VERO BEACH The buzz in the close-knit Florida grower crowd started in 2000: A wealthy Missouri farmer was buying groves. Lots of groves.

Almost nine years later, many still haven't met Gaylon Lawrence Sr., 74, or his son, Gaylon Lawrence Jr., 46. The Lawrence Group represents the holdings of Gaylon Lawrence Jr., of Nashville and Gaylon Lawrence Sr., of Vero Beach. The father-and-son team made a third bid for U.S. Sugar Corp. in November. Here's a look at their holdings:

Florida citrus: 30,000 acres of citrus, primarily in St. Lucie and Indian River counties. Corporations include Premier Citrus Packers LLC, Premier Citrus Marketing LLC, Premier Citrus Management LL, Premier Land Acquisitions LLC.

In less than 10 years, Premier has become the state's largest producer of fresh fruit.

Farmland: 150,000 acres of farmland in Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas and Mississippi. They grow cotton, soybeans, rice, wheat and corn.

U.S. Airconditioning Distributors, City of Industry, Calif.: The world's largest privately owned heating, ventilation and air conditioning distributor with $600 million in sales. It operates in California, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Arizona and Florida.

Banking: The Lawrences' first bank was founded in 1908; they now own five community banks with 15 offices in northeast Arkansas, southeast Missouri and Tennessee.

Sources: The Lawrence Group; U.S. Air-conditioning Distributors; Farmers Bank and Trust.

News account mentions of the father-and-son business team are rare and photographs remain scarce. Until recently, interviews with the media were shunned. But the Lawrence footprint is all over Florida. Lawrence Sr.'s Premier Citrus LLC, based in Vero Beach, is the largest citrus fruit grower for the fresh market on Florida's east coast. Now, the biggest land deal of all has thrust the farming family into an unaccustomed spotlight: The Lawrence Group has launched what amounts to a hostile takeover bid for U.S. Sugar, just as the state is sealing a deal to buy 181,000 acres from the company to help restore the Everglades.

It would seem like a done deal. The South Florida Water Management District voted 4-3 to pay $1.3 billion for U.S. Sugar's land. U.S. Sugar, tightly controlled by a handful of shareholders, has voted to sell.

But under the laws of Delaware, where U.S. Sugar is legally headquartered, the cane company must entertain other bids through Feb. 15. And a lawsuit filed by other shareholders who wanted Lawrence to buy U.S. Sugar is pending.

Perhaps most important is that the Lawrence family, whose three bids to buy U.S. Sugar all have been rebuffed, shows no signs of pulling back. 'We are committed to doing what it takes to buy the company,' said Gaylon Lawrence Jr. in a recent phone interview. The votes have changed nothing.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the Lawrence Group, said
Andy Taylor, vice president of finance for Peace River Citrus Products in Vero Beach. Gaylon Lawrence Sr., Taylor notes, 'is a gentleman of substantial means.' With 150,000 acres in Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi and Florida, The Lawrence Group is one of the largest family farming enterprises in the United States.

Randall Ramsey, mayor of Parma, Mo., population 1,000, owned the International Harvester farming equipment dealership there and did business with Lawrence Sr. for 30 years. 'He came from common roots. His dad was a small farmer. The lenders, the large insurance companies, trust him and believe in him,' Ramsey said. Not as well-known are the family's holdings in U.S. Airconditioning Distributors Inc., the world's largest privately owned heating, ventilation and air conditioning distributor, with about $600 million a year in sales and a goal of $1 billion by 2010.

A family-owned bank, Farmers Bank & Trust of Blytheville, Ark., dates to 1908. Lawrence Jr., moved to Nashville in 2003 to start an offshoot bank, Tennessee Bank & Trust, where he serves as vice chairman. In all, The Lawrence Group owns five community banks.

Publicity-shy farmers are common, said Missy Marshall, executive director of the Sikeston Area Chamber of Commerce, a Missouri town of 17,000 adjacent to Lawrence land.

Every year, the chamber singles out a farming family for recognition. And every year, 'We struggle to find one because they don't want anybody knowing their business. It is kind of comical and charming,' Marshall said. 'There are so many others who want to be in the limelight all the time. This is a culture that tends to steer clear of that.' The Lawrences' foray into Florida farming started with Lawrence Sr.'s 2000 acquisition of a small grove. 'He even told me, 'This grove will give me something to do,' ' Lawrence Jr. said during a telephone interview from his office at Tennessee Bank & Trust in Nashville.

This season, Premier Citrus LLC, which sells its fruit in the United States, Europe and Japan, expects to pack 2 million boxes of citrus. In the 2007-08 season, Premier was the state's top grapefruit producer, at 1.553 million boxes. 'They are the dominant person in the fresh fruit business now,' said Don Rice, CEO of Farm Credit of South Florida in Royal Palm Beach. Premier's 32,000 acres of grove land is primarily in St. Lucie and Indian River counties. J. Kevin Bynum owns 25 percent of the company and the senior Lawrence owns 75 percent, according to state records.

Bynum said the company expects to harvest about 4.5 million boxes of oranges for the juice market and 2.5 million boxes of fresh fruit. Their interest is surprising, given the twin threat of citrus canker and greening, which has prompted other growers to call it quits. At 576,577 acres, the Florida industry is at its lowest point since record keeping began in 1966, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Indian River Citrus League is down to 900 grower-members from its peak of about 1,200. 'We are all worried about canker and greening,' Bynum said. But the Lawrences are still buying. In early 2007, as the real estate bubble was bursting, Premier Citrus picked up close to $100 million in groves.

In November, Premier purchased another 2,000 acres of groves in Indian River County for $15 million. 'I love it,' said Doug Bournique, executive vice president of the Indian River Citrus League. 'I love to
see a contrarian out there who thinks it is going to get better.' As for the Lawrences' interest in sugar, Bournique said, 'His bid for U. S. Sugar is a tremendous bid for everybody concerned.' Peace River's Taylor agrees. 'I think it is consistent with their commitment to agriculture. I think it is in line with their business. 'I don't think they can be ignored.' In 2006 and again in 2007, U.S. Sugar passed on The Lawrence Group's $575 million bid to buy the company. This November, the Lawrences tried again, offering $300 a share for U. S. Sugar's land and operations. That could total an estimated $588 million.

U.S. Sugar returned a $27 million 'good faith' check accompanying The Lawrence Group's formal letter of interest, calling the overture a 'non-binding expression of interest.' U.S. Sugar clearly favors the South Florida Water Management District's $1.34 billion offer for its land. The district would use the 181,000 acres to create a freshwater flow-way to help rejuvenate the Everglades.

U.S. Sugar would get to keep other assets, including a state-of-the-art mill, and retain the right to lease the land for about $50 an acre, or sublease the land to other agriculture interests.

The decision to sell comes at a time when the company is shouldering a $700 million mortgage. Its last sugar crop fell short of estimates.

Lawrence Jr., though, thinks U.S. Sugar's properties can be made profitable. 'Our whole life we have been taking on agricultural properties that other people don't want - either they wanted to get their money out or they were not making enough money. That's what we do,' he said. 'We like to buy agricultural lands. We like to figure out how to make them produce better.' The Lawrence Group, which says it would turn over thousands of acres to the water district, contends its proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar saves taxpayer money, benefits shareholders and can still clean the Everglades. That attitude has won fans in Clewiston, a town built around U.S. Sugar operations. 'It would have been the absolute best thing for Clewiston and for the shareholders,' said Miller Couse, CEO and chairman of the First Bank of Clewiston.

Couse, like some others, refers to a Lawrence purchase proposal in the past tense.

But it may be too soon to call.

Take the federal lawsuit U.S. Sugar shareholders filed. They claim they were never told that The Lawrence Group had tried to buy the company in 2006 - and for a price 51 percent higher than U.S. Sugar stock at that time.

The value of that stock is key to retirees, because they are also shareholders of the private company. In some cases, the stock represents most of their retirement funds. The case is not slated for trial until June 22, long after the water district-U.S. Sugar deal is expected to be finalized. If the shareholders win, it's not clear who would have to ante up any financial damages. Meanwhile, The Lawrence Group's $300-a-share offer for U.S. Sugar is higher than its earlier bid at the heart of the lawsuit.

U.S. Sugar competitor Florida Crystals Corp. has expressed concern that terms of the water district sale could give U.S. Sugar cash, land and a state-financed competitive advantage.
The Lawrence Group has not ruled out its own litigation. Mostly, said Lawrence Jr., they just want to farm. 'If it takes land to grow it,' he said, 'then we are interested.'