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**Total Clips: 4**

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
 <a href="#">Glades deal an 'unprecedented opportunity'</a>	05/31/2009	Ocala.com	Eric Buermann
<a href="#">Saving the River of Grass</a>	05/29/2009	Sun Sentinel	Eric Buermann
<a href="#">Keep water decisions public</a>	05/28/2009	Palm Beach Post	
 <a href="#">Restoring the Everglades</a>	05/28/2009	Florida Today	

## Glades deal an 'unprecedented opportunity'

05/31/2009

Ocala.com

Eric Buermann

[Return to Top](#)

Everglades restoration has been a priority at the South Florida Water Management District for more than a decade. That priority was underscored this month with a landmark decision by the district's Governing Board to invest \$536 million in the largest land buy in the agency's history - a 73,000-acre acquisition that will provide unprecedented opportunities for preserving the famed River of Grass.

When the multi-billion state-federal partnership to restore the Everglades was first developed in the 1990s, access to vast areas of agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee to construct restoration projects was not a possibility.

But that changed last June when Gov. Charlie Crist announced the willingness of the United States Sugar Corp. to sell its land holdings to the district for Everglades restoration. It was a milestone moment for the environment - followed by months of complex negotiations, hard work and due diligence.

Over many months of deliberation, the district's Governing Board carefully weighed the restoration opportunities of this purchase with the agency's additional responsibilities for flood control, water quality improvements and protection of the regional water supply. With fiscal realities in mind, the board approved an affordable acquisition strategy that would place 112 square miles of strategically located property into public ownership by next year, with an option to purchase another 167 square miles during the next 10 years.

This historic acquisition promises incalculable benefits to the River of Grass and to Florida's coastal estuaries. Most notably, projects are contemplated that will improve water quality treatment to deliver cleaner water to the Everglades and prevent tons of harmful nutrients from entering the fragile ecosystem. Other projects will significantly increase water storage, improving the flow of water to the Everglades, reducing harmful freshwater discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and virtually eliminating the need for "back-pumping" stormwater runoff into the lake. Without this land, opportunities for some of these projects and their benefits could be lost.

While allowing for economic conditions to improve, the phased approach to acquiring land also helps to sustain agriculture in the region, an important part of the local and statewide economy. Furthermore, it will provide at least a decade for the Glades communities, which depend heavily on agriculture, to work with the state and other partners to develop new industries and growth opportunities for their region.

Acquiring these strategic lands is the first step in realizing our restoration goals, which will require vision, leadership, cooperation and partnership at all levels. Project planning, now under way with scientists, engineers and a diversity of interests, must remain an inclusive and collaborative process. Project permitting with regulatory agencies must be streamlined so that unnecessary and costly litigation does not impair our efforts. And our federal partners in restoration must continue to deliver their share of project funding. This vast area of land will serve the Everglades - and the economy - when dirt has actually been turned and constructed projects are in the ground and operating.

In our board discussions, I often compared this acquisition to the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 brought more than 800,000 square miles into public ownership and doubled the size of the United States. President Thomas Jefferson believed the controversial purchase was a priority investment, and history proved him right. This acquisition is not nearly on that scale - but for Everglades restoration, it feels that big. And it promises equally big opportunities in return.

Eric Buermann is a Miami lawyer and chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.

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## **Saving the River of Grass**

05/29/2009

Sun Sentinel

Eric Buermann

[Return to Top](#)

Everglades restoration has long been a priority at the South Florida Water Management District. That priority was underscored this month with a landmark decision to invest \$536 million in the largest land buy in the agency's history — a 73,000-acre acquisition that will provide unprecedented opportunities for preserving the famed River of Grass.

When the multibillion-dollar state-federal partnership to restore the Everglades was first developed in the 1990s, access to vast areas of agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee to construct restoration projects was not a possibility. But that changed when Gov. Charlie Crist announced the willingness of U.S. Sugar to sell its land holdings for Everglades restoration. It was a milestone moment for the environment.

The district's Governing Board carefully weighed the restoration opportunities with the agency's responsibilities for flood control, water quality and protection of the regional water supply. With fiscal realities in mind, the board approved an affordable strategy that would place 112 square miles of strategically located property into public ownership by next year, with an option to purchase another 167 square miles during the next 10 years.

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## Keep water decisions public

05/28/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Palm Beach Post

Imagine if a county administrator in Florida could make development decisions in secret, without asking the county commissioners. Only if the administrator denied a request would the commissioners have a say.

Lousy, right? Hiding public business from the public, right? So, Gov. Crist should veto a bill that would allow such secrecy about the state's most important resource: water.

Florida has five water management districts, one for each of the state's major watersheds. This area is part of the South Florida Water Management District. The districts make lots of big decisions about flood control and the environment, but perhaps the biggest decisions are on permits for how much water a government or a development or a farm can use. Currently, the districts' governing boards approve or deny permits during the monthly public meetings. Senate Bill 2080 would give all those decisions to the districts' executive directors. The board would have a role only if a water permit were denied.

SB 2080 didn't start out this way. It began as legislation from Sen. J.D. Alexander, R-Lake Wales, to create the West-Central Florida Water Restoration Plan, which would rehydrate 5,100 square miles of the state that are part of the Southwest Florida Water Management District. But Rep. Denise Grimsley, R-Lake Placid, added the unrelated amendment about water permits. Her changes also include limits on how much water districts can issue in bonds without approval from the Legislature.

According to critics of the bill, Rep. Grimsley got mad when the South Florida Water Management District approved the U.S. Sugar deal. Her district includes Hendry County, where U.S. Sugar is based and opposition to the deal - that still has to close - remains strong. This legislation, though, is the wrong response. Rep. Grimsley argues that district staff members review all permit applications, that boards can delegate decisions now and that most decisions aren't controversial. For the controversial ones, though, public review and oversight are essential.

Based on her comments to The Post, Rep. Grimsley is threatening retribution if Gov. Crist vetoes SB 2080. It reauthorizes all five water management districts. A veto would push reauthorization to next year, and Rep. Grimsley tossed off the irresponsible comment that perhaps the state wouldn't need all five districts.

In fact, the early '70s creation of the districts - which, among other things, made environmental preservation as important as flood control - was one of the Legislature's visionary actions. With Florida's population having nearly tripled since then, decisions about water have become even more important and deserving of public scrutiny. Revenge politics would be the wrong way to set water policy in Florida.

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## Restoring the Everglades

05/28/2009

Florida Today

By Eric Buermann

[Return to Top](#)

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