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Land Deal Could Aid Everglades Restoration

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A land deal proposed by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist could potentially help water managers find better ways to restore the Florida Everglades, an official says.

Carol Ann Wehle, South Florida Water Management District executive director, said if the state's offer to purchase 73,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. is approved next week, it could pave the way for additional land deals, The Miami Herald reported Saturday.

"This puts us in a much better bargaining position in any future negotiations," Wehle said of the \$536 million deal.

The proposal to purchase sugar fields and citrus groves in Florida includes plans to turn the lands into pollution treatment marshes and reservoirs. Such changes should help bring cleaner water to the Everglades, the Herald said.

The land deal represents a significantly cheaper proposal than a prior plan to purchase 180,000 acres of land for \$1.34 billion.

Jacque Weisblum, the Audubon of Florida's Everglades coordinator, praised the new deal, but remained cautious about its possible passage next Wednesday.

"For me, that is great news," Weisblum told the Herald. "But I want to see it signed."

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U.S. SENATE RACE Crist's top donors represent special interests

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For evidence of a sitting governor's power to generate campaign contributions, take a look at the donors to Charlie Crist's record-shattering \$4.3 million fundraising haul for U.S. Senate.

From a prison-building company to a high-powered lobbying firm to Big Sugar, the top contributors to Crist's campaign represent some of the biggest special interests in the state Capitol. The most generous city to the governor's campaign: Tallahassee.

Big chunks of campaign money also came from law firms. Lawyers at Orlando-based Morgan & Morgan -- where Crist's lieutenant governor, Jeff Kottkamp, previously worked -- contributed at least \$87,400. And employees of Rothstein, Rosenfeldt, Adler of Fort Lauderdale gave about \$77,750, according to a Herald/Times analysis of contributions Crist received between April and June.

These figures don't include ``bundled" checks collected by the lawyers from family members, friends and clients. Attorney John Morgan said he helped Crist raise about \$300,000 at a event at an Orlando hotel followed by a dinner at his home.

``Never forget the power of incumbency," Morgan said. ``The governor has 18 months left, one more legislative session left, and hundreds and hundreds of board appointments and judicial appointments left in one of the biggest states in the country."

Morgan noted that his one fundraiser generated nearly as much money as the entire, \$340,000 stash collected in three months by Crist's Republican rival, former House Speaker Marco Rubio of West Miami. Rubio was recently forced to take his campaign manager and professional fundraiser off his limited payroll.

' PART OF THE SYSTEM'

``As a sitting governor, he has the ability to leverage the power of his office to raise money," Rubio said in a recent speech to a conservative political club in Tallahassee. ``There's nothing illegal about it. It's part of the system. But money alone does not decide elections."

The leading Democratic contender for Senate, U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek of Miami, raised about \$1.2 million in the past three months. He spent \$448,302, leaving him with about \$2.33 million in cash. In contrast, Crist spent only \$191,804, leaving him with nearly \$4.18 million.

Crist laid out far less than Meek on airline tickets, hotels, office equipment and consultants. Meek, for example, doled out \$50,000 to a single consulting firm -- Bendixen & Associates of Coral Gables -- for ``focus groups."

Meek spokeswoman Ana Cruz noted that the congressman is trying to become the first statewide candidate in Florida to qualify for the ballot by collecting signatures instead of paying a fee.

``People don't realize how big this state is," Cruz said. ``It takes a lot of resources, time and money to build a statewide organization and mobilize grass-roots organizers."

After announcing his fundraising total last month, Crist said he was ``humbled" by the outpouring of support. He had urged donors to give the maximum of \$2,400 for the primary election and another \$2,400 for the general election. That means he has a \$1.4 million head start if he wins the primary, but those donors are tapped out.

OUTSIDE FLORIDA

Many of the most generous political action committees to Crist's campaign are tied to incumbent Republican senators anxious to stop the Democratic party from expanding its majority. Donations of at least \$5,000 came from groups led by Republican Leader Mitch McConnell and Sens. John McCain of Arizona, Susan Collins of Maine, John Thune of South Dakota, Richard Burr of North Carolina, Saxby Chambliss of Georgia, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee and John Cornyn of Texas.

About 10 percent of Crist's money came from outside Florida. On Saturday, the governor is slated to attend an Aspen, Colo., fundraiser at the vacation home of Tampa Bay developer Brent Sembler. His Saturday schedule does not include the Jacksonville memorial service for the late Sen. Jim King.

Crist announced his candidacy May 12, just as he was poised to sign the state budget and decide which legislation to veto. Among his top 10 contributors:

- The GEO Group, based in Boca Raton, gave at least \$39,900, not including ``bundled" contributions from

employees' relatives and friends. The private prison contractor and its healthcare subsidiary unsuccessfully sought to privatize a North Florida mental hospital this year but managed to help slip language into the budget that could pave the way for more prison contracts.

- Keiser University: \$29,000. The Fort Lauderdale-based university with a dozen campuses statewide lobbied Florida officials this year to continue scholarship grants.

- Southern Strategy Group: \$28,000. The firm represents about 50 clients in Tallahassee, including Tampa Electric Co., which gave at least \$19,000. Florida Power & Light, which like TECO sought to influence energy-related legislation, gave at least \$22,000.

- Huizenga Enterprises: \$24,600. A longtime Republican fundraiser, H. Wayne Huizenga and his company own the Miami Dolphins' Land Shark Stadium, which along with other arenas, persuaded the state to stop what they said was ``double taxation'' on concessions.

- U.S. Sugar: \$19,200. With Crist's full-throated support, the company sold a big chunk of its land to the state for Everglades restoration. It also helped persuade Crist to sign legislation allowing for 50-year water-use permits.

``We weren't No. 1?" joked spokesman Bob Coker, when told his company ranked seventh in donations. ``We've got to do better."''

Herald/Times computer-assisted reporting specialist Constance Humburg and Miami Herald staff writer Rob Barry contributed to this report.

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