Thundering explosions that shook the earth and stopped traffic on U.S. 27 once signaled progress in South Florida's long-stalled struggle to provide water to revive the Everglades.

Work crews spent nearly two years scraping away muck and blasting through limestone to lay the groundwork for a city-sized reservoir on farmland in southwest Palm Beach County.

But now, after South Florida taxpayers invested almost $280 million in the unfinished project, water managers say the reservoir might be in the wrong place.

Instead of becoming one of the first finished projects in the multi-billion-dollar replumbing of the Everglades' River of Grass, work was stopped in June 2008. Last week, the South Florida Water Management District voted to spend $12 million to cancel the construction contract.

District officials insist that taxpayer money was not wasted on a $280 million boondoggle. Instead of walking away, they say they just pushed pause and are re-evaluating how to best use the land.

Everglades restoration plans are changing because of the pending half-billion-dollar deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp to build reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas.

The unfinished reservoir project could be converted to a less-expensive treatment area or smaller reservoir that fits in better with plans for U.S. Sugar land, according to the district.

The U.S. Sugar deal, coupled with a legal challenge filed against the reservoir, made it more fiscally responsible to stop building the reservoir than to proceed with another $400 million in anticipated construction costs, district board Chairman Eric Buermann said.

"We had to make a decision," Buermann said. "People fret too much by looking at the short term and not playing the whole thing out. ? This is for the long-term benefits."

Yet critics of the U.S. Sugar deal point to the unfinished reservoir as evidence that the land buy just leads to more delays and diverts money from helping the long-suffering Everglades.
They dispute that the district can easily rework the construction at the reservoir site into another restoration project.

Leaving the reservoir unfinished was a waste of money and a "disaster for the Everglades," said Dexter Lehtinen, attorney for the Miccosukee Tribe. The tribe's lands are located in the Everglades and Lehtinen is waging a legal battle against the U.S. Sugar deal. "We have gone backward because of the U.S. Sugar deal," Lehtinen said.

The reservoir was supposed to be a key part of the plan to correct decades of draining land for farming and development that robbed the Everglades of water.

The 16,700-acre reservoir, planned on old sugar cane fields beside U.S. 27, could have held 62 billion gallons of stormwater. Embankments rising 30-feet high were envisioned to hold a massive pool of water up to 12.5 feet deep.

The work completed so far included a 13.5-mile-long canal to capture water that seeps through the earthen structure. Work crews also scraped away the mucky-soil in a 100-foot-wide, 22-mile-long swath of land that was to become the base of the reservoir embankments.

During the summer of 2008, the reservoir construction was to move into its costliest phase -- building the 22-miles of embankments as well as a 60-foot-tall "curtain wall" of clay that would stretch below the ground to guard against flooding.

The wall is necessary for a deep-water reservoir, said Tommy Strowd, who oversees district restoration projects. "Once you start that, you either were going to build a reservoir or nothing. There was no going back," Strowd said.

The district's board opted to at least temporarily stop construction, initially citing concerns about the ramifications of a lingering legal challenge to the reservoir filed by the National Resources Defense Council.

Representatives for the environmental group were surprised by the move, saying they didn't want construction stopped but instead wanted more guarantees that the reservoir water would be dedicated to environmental needs.

Just a few weeks after construction stopped in June 2008, Gov. Charlie Crist and district officials announced plans to buy U.S. Sugar farmland.

The reservoir was originally supposed to be finished by 2010. "That should have been the priority," said district Board Member Michael Collins, who cast the only vote against canceling the construction contract.

Instead, the district is focused on trying to borrow the money needed to close on the U.S. Sugar deal by a June deadline.

Meanwhile, those mounds of rock piled on the reservoir land near U.S. 27 stand as a monument to stalled progress.

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