Despite clever and unending sniping by several agricultural interests, the move to buy out large Big Sugar holdings now moves forward.

By unanimous vote, the governing board of the South Florida Water Management District approved an extension of its $536 million contract to purchase 72,800 acres owned by U.S. Sugar to provide a “missing link” flowway through the overdrained Everglades Agricultural Area just south of Lake Okeechobee.

The extension bodes well for the troubled St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, which are bombarded in wet years by excess drainage discharges made to keep sugarland roots dry and toasty.

The sugarland (and some citrus) purchase should make it possible to create a way to send excessive and polluted water southward. That would be a long-sought-after type of “Plan Six,” which was a government-spawned number of a restoration option 15 years ago.

Next step for the acquisition will be consideration by the Florida Supreme Court of the state’s borrowing details. That’s expected to be a basically routine procedure.

Still, the fight’s not over by a long cane stalk.

State Sen. Paula Dockery, R-Lakeland, and others cozy to competing businesses warn that Florida may well go deep in the hole paying for the property, and that other projects will suffer. Payments will require higher taxes, they half-whisper. In truth, the loans are to be repaid under existing frameworks.

Naysayers’ grumblings form the same scare story that blocked Everglades restoration in the mid-1990s, using tactics that included a false (and very expensive) mailer to all voters stating that property taxes would be raised. Not so.

One might style the long-running tussle as the Pollution Establishment vs. the Public Good. Sadly, the former usually prevails via its thoughtful gifts to decision-makers and elaborate public-relations ploys.

This time (fingers crossed), it looks like virtually all nonprofit environmental groups are
showing unprecedented power against the status quo of dirtied waters and nutrient pollution of the type that shooed away both kids and dogs from touching our storied estuarine habitat.

At the water management district hearing last week, only three spokespersons tried to carry Big Sugar’s bucket while 25 people from Stuart’s Rivers Coalition, Florida Oceanographic, Everglades Foundation, Audubon, Sierra and others made powerful presentations extolling the long-term benefits possible.

Not a governing board member questioned the deal, other than outgoing board member Mike Collins, who spoke for his minute, and shortly thereafter stomped with steel heels clacking out of the hearing auditorium at the Brighton Seminole reservation west of Okeechobee.

The U.S. Sugar purchase dovetails perfectly with the goal of the Rivers Coalition Defense Fund’s federal lawsuit against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the agency that periodically opens the floodgates of pollution into the estuaries, for lack of a better place. The lawsuit is on appeal in Washington, as no doubt will be the sugarland acquisition.

We have no choice but to fight on, for an estuarine jewel crying for our continued support.

Wickstrom is founder of Stuart-based Florida Sportsman Magazine and head of the Rivers Coalition legal defense fund. E-mail: kywickstrom@yahoo.com