Editorial: Proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar land holds great promise for South Florida's aquatic ecosystem

editorial board

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The Florida Supreme Court will rule soon whether the state may proceed with its $536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land.

There’s a lot riding on the court’s decision — not the least of which is our region’s golden opportunity to substantially correct major environmental problems.

It would be a setback if the high court halts the land acquisition project. Why? Because we’ve never been so close to real, significant restoration of our aquatic ecosystem.

This is the message from Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation, and Thomas Van Lent, the foundation’s senior scientist. Both men met recently with the editorial board of Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers to discuss Everglades restoration and the land-acquisition project.

The take-away? If the land deal is consummated, our region could see a sizable reduction in the amount of polluted water in the St. Lucie estuary within seven years.

The 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land is a lot less than what is needed to recreate the flow-way from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay, and restore the River of Grass. To recreate the flow-way, the South Florida Water Management District would have to purchase additional land from Florida Crystals, which has complained about being shut out of the conversation.

Despite this shortcoming, the 73,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area can be used for water treatment and water storage — to the great benefit of our region.

“It resolves two major issues,” Van Lent said of the additional land. “First, it resolves some of the existing water quality issues for the Loxahatchee River and back-pumping in Lake Okeechobee. Second, instead of sending water from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, it would allow for the development of a new outlet for water to the south.”

The result?

“It would be possible to substantially reduce damaging, high-water flows into the St. Lucie estuary,” Van Lent said.

It’s hard to imagine that scenario these days. In recent weeks, the Army Corps of
Engineers has been releasing more than a billion gallons of polluted water a day into the estuary.

The proposed purchase of U.S. Sugar land is far from perfect. The cost — $536 million — will place a financial burden on the water management district and delay or terminate other restoration projects. Much more land is needed to recreate the flow-way. Also, the state should be negotiating with Florida Crystals, not just U.S. Sugar.

But, all things considered, the land acquisition project holds great promise for South Florida’s aquatic ecosystem.