Eighteen months ago, the federal judge overseeing Everglades cleanup progress endorsed the state's effort to buy vast tracts of sugar farms, calling the opportunity to ``buy out the polluters'' the most logical solution to resolving long-standing problems.

Chief U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno has scheduled a status hearing Tuesday that could impact the controversial land deal's already uncertain future.

Pending before the judge are two motions from the Miccosukee Tribe, which has filed multiple lawsuits and motions in an effort to block the $536 million land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. One would order South Florida Water Management District administrators to restart construction of a stalled $700 million reservoir, and another would block the cancellation of a project intended to improve the performance of the district's pollution-cleaning marshes.

In addition, the water district and federal agencies are negotiating a settlement over water quality violations in a Palm Beach County national wildlife refuge.

In August 2008, the judge denied a request by the tribe to order work resumed on a massive, partially completed basin once considered a key to Everglades restoration plans. Water managers and conservation groups had told the judge that continuing that project could threaten something more promising for the Glades.

But Moreno also warned that if the land acquisition didn't happen in a ``reasonable amount of time,'' he would revisit
the tribe's request.

The land deal has been downsized twice since. Last week, water managers extended a contract deadline by six months, to September.

Letters to the Editor
03/16/2010
Miami Herald, The
Buy U.S. Sugar land

Marjory Stoneman Douglas once said, "You can't conserve what you haven't got." If we don't buy the U.S. Sugar land, we can't clean the water and restore flow to the Everglades. Marjory knew you have to have the land to do it. If we let this deal slip away, we can kiss the Everglades goodbye too.

DEBBIE MATTHEWS, Sierra Club Miami Group chair, Miami

Crist's big promises, no cash sour Everglades deal
03/16/2010
Orlando Sentinel
Mike Thomas

It's hard to imagine a more disastrous finale to Gov. Charlie Crist's reign as governor than the implosion of a decades-long effort to put the Everglades back together again.

The great swamp and the golden governor may well go down together.

A lot of people are scrambling to prevent that.

But money is money. And there isn't enough of it to pay for Crist's plan to begin buying out one of the Everglades' biggest polluters: U.S. Sugar Corp.

It seems that, once again, Charlie has promised more than he can deliver.

This time, even The New York Times has blown the whistle on him. It weighed in with one of its opus investigations last week, making the case that the Everglades deal is a huge corporate bailout for U.S. Sugar.

I've been saying that for a while now, but without all the ink, internal e-mails, 60 interviews, long sentences and national clout of the Times.

This is a true fiasco. The old plan to save the Everglades — the one that was forever in the making and finally got under way — was put on hold for Charlie's plan. This pulled the plug on a massive reservoir that was halted in mid-construction after $280 million was spent on it.

If the state had to do a big oopsie and restart construction, that would add millions to the cost and years to the completion date.
The Everglades deal has fallen apart with almost the same speed of Crist’s Senate campaign. Less than two years ago, Crist announced plans to buy out all of U.S. Sugar’s 290 square miles for $1.7 billion. But then someone counted the money and whittled the deal down.

Then someone counted the money again and whittled it down again — this time to $536 million for 114 square miles. The rest would be bought in the future, apparently in a galaxy far, far away.

Now, darn it, someone counted the money yet again, and the South Florida Water Management District, which oversee the Glades, can’t even afford the scaled-down version of the scaled-down version.

It’s hard to borrow a half-billion dollars when your consultant says it would put you more than $100 million in the red by 2012.

Time was when Wall Street would have given me a half-billion on my home-equity loan to buy swampland. No more. To raise such loot now, the water district would have to gut its budget and shell out payday-loan interest rates. Even at that, a tax increase would be inevitable.

I might be more motivated to plow ahead under better circumstances. But these circumstances stink.

U.S. Sugar is in dismal financial shape, according to stories in the Miami Herald. Costs are up. Profits are down. Same old story.

A big drag is the company’s citrus operations. It owns three groves covering about 32,000 acres.

An appraisal notes that the largest grove — about 17,700 acres — is in “relatively poor condition” and “is not currently producing adequate income to cover caretaking and other costs of operation.”

It has been hit hard by a deadly citrus-tree disease called greening. The outbreak increased production costs up to 50 percent when the price of fruit juice was going down.

The next-biggest grove, covering 9,441 acres, has been so ravaged by disease and hurricanes that only 55 percent of the land available for citrus is being used.

These groves are far-flung and in the hinterlands, diminishing their value.

Why is the district buying them? Because U.S. Sugar demanded it, and the Governor’s Office, under intense political pressure to salvage a deal, agreed.

U.S. Sugar not only dumps its worst-performing assets, but it also gets top dollar for them. Meanwhile, it holds on to most of the rich, sugar-producing lands the district does need for restoration.

The state can come for them later, if it ever scrapes up the cash. Again, never say never, but...

You only get this kind of deal when you’re dealing with the government.

The response of my green friends is predictable.

"Price should not get in the way of this historic opportunity," said Eric Draper of the Florida Audubon Society.

What does a rip-off matter in the grand scheme of saving the Everglades? In 50 years, will anyone remember we paid a princely sum for diseased farmland?

It is a legitimate argument, but one that held greater sway when we had enough money that price didn’t matter. Now it does — tremendously so.

Barring another torrent of ObamaBucks, I don’t see how this deal gets done. That means the state must do what it has never had the courage to do: decide what land is necessary for the Everglades. And condemn it as money becomes available.

Mike Thomas can be reached at 407-420-5525 or mthomas@orlandosentinel.com.
Florida Senate: Can Charlie Crist Rebound Vs. Marco Rubio?
(Time.com)
03/16/2010
Yahoo! News
TIM PADGETT / MIAMI

Florida voters knew Republican Governor Charlie Crist would go on the attack sooner or later this year to try to salvage his floundering campaign for the U.S. Senate. But they surely had no idea that his rival's grooming habits would become an issue. Last week on Fox News, Crist blasted his surging opponent in the August Republican primary election, former Florida house speaker Marco Rubio, for having used a GOP-issued American Express card for personal purchases, including $133.75 spent at a deluxe Miami barbershop. Rubio is "trying to pawn himself off as a fiscal conservative," Crist said. "And yet he had a Republican Party of Florida credit card [and] he charged $130 for a haircut, or maybe it was a back wax. We are not sure what all he got at that place." (See 10 elections that changed America.)

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Rubio, the U.S. Sugar "bailout" is another example of how Crist has forgotten the bedrock Republican ideal that "this country was built on the principles of limited government," he told TIME recently.

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Rubio's campaign argues that his record as state house speaker, when he ushered bills like an insurance overhaul for hurricane-harassed Floridians, reflects experience as well. But Foreman believes Rubio faces his own dilemma: whether to continue to keep a safe distance from, or buddy up to, the Tea Party fringe that has helped galvanize his poll numbers but remains skeptical about his commitment to red-meat causes like immigration restrictions and gun owners' rights. Still, Rubio's problems are slight by comparison. The only candidate who looks waxed at the moment is Charlie Crist.

- With reporting by Wendy Malloy / Tampa

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**Everglades needs right deal**

03/16/2010

Bradenton Herald - Online

The new battle to save the Everglades depends on money and compromise even more than science.

Gov. Charlie Crist's grand plan to buy out U.S. Sugar is threatened by lagging tax revenues, costly lawsuits and the absence of a key player in the negotiations.

Twice downscaled, the governor's vision of converting thousands of acres of cane fields to water-cleansing marshes is far from dead. However, the deal is receiving close scrutiny and mounting criticism, some of it justified.

As it stands, Florida would pay $536 million for 72,800 acres of U.S. Sugar property near Lake Okeechobee. The company would be allowed to continue farming cane for at least seven years, and the state would keep an option to buy another 107,000 acres.

The purchase would add $45 million of annual debt to the already-strapped South Florida Water Management District, and cause the delay or cancellation of other Everglades projects in the works. Several have already been affected by forecasted deficits.

Meanwhile the deal is an undisputed boon to U.S. Sugar, which has been struggling. Critics say the state is overpaying for the company's farm fields, which were appraised at pre-recession values.

What else is new? Government always overpays for land that it needs. The Florida Turnpike wouldn't exist today if the state had insisted on paying true market value for every parcel between Wildwood and Homestead.

There's only one Everglades watershed, and the time to salvage what remains of it is running out.

U.S. Sugar executives knew they could demand sweet terms. Included in the sales package were old citrus groves, far-flung segments that are basically worthless to the Glades' restoration plan.

However, there's also invaluable acreage for future wetlands and reservoirs just south of Clewiston in what was once
The discouraging fact is that even if the U.S. Sugar deal goes through, all that land still won't be enough. Reviving the Everglades is impossible without including Florida Crystals, the thriving sugar empire run by the Fanjul family.

Florida Crystals owns sweeping miles of farmland that are crucial to the new Everglades map. Early on, the company had quietly shown an interest in participating in the governor's plan, either by selling some cane holdings to the state or swapping for U.S. Sugar tracts.

Something happened — or maybe failed to happen — and now Florida Crystals is vigorously fighting to block the Crist deal, claiming it amounts to a taxpayer bailout for U.S. Sugar.

That argument is rich with irony. Taxpayers have been bailing out big sugar growers for decades with federal price supports that enriched the industry even as it used the Everglades for a commode. Florida Crystals and rival U.S. Sugar both prospered handsomely.

Weary of being villified, and facing stiffer regulations, Big Sugar in recent years has tried to clean up its act by cleaning its water runoff.

Mike Thomas
03/16/2010
Baltimore Sun - Online
Mike Thomas
Should the Everglades be saved, no matter the cost?

No. We're in too much debt as it is.

Only if and when we can afford it.

os-mike-thomas-everglades-restoration-03120100315

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