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Crist visits Stuart, defends Everglades deal
03/19/2010
WPTV-TV
Garner, Bryan

STUART, FL -- Governor Charlie Crist shook hands and embraced old friends in Stuart Thursday, at a time when he could use all the friends he can get.

"I couldn't be more grateful to them," he said.

His plan to buy up more than 70,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar to help restore the natural flow of water through the Everglades is facing tough criticism including some from his own party.

Marco Rubio, his Republican challenger for the U.S. Senate, calls the plan "disastrous for tax payers."

Former Governor Jeb Bush dismissed it as "photo-op environmental policy."

At a photo-op on the banks of the St. Lucie River, Crist defended his plan and praised the South Florida Water Management District board members he appointed who agreed to extend the deal's deadline through September.

"They had an onslaught of adverse publicity trying to stop them but in the face of that they stood strong and with great courage and did what's right for our Florida," he said.

Facing a sagging economy, Crist downsized his plan twice since he announced it two years ago. The scaled down plan won't provide enough land to build a flow-way from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, but its supporters say it's a step in the right direction.

"We have identified the acreage we need for water storage and water quality improvements," said Michael Sole, Florida's Secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection.

And for now, local environmentalists – long hoping for relief from the pollution of the St. Lucie River – say they're standing by their man.

"We can look for a lot of changes in future years if we all hang in there and work together," said Karl Wickstrom, head of the Rivers Coalition legal defense fund.
With the odds of borrowing a half-billion bucks growing dicey, water managers are exploring new ways to finance Gov. Charlie Crist's deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp. -- a controversial land buy the governor stood firmly behind Thursday during a South Florida visit.

One possible alternative: Pay for a big chunk -- perhaps even all -- of the $536 million price tag in cash.

But coming up with cash up front could require serious, and politically messy, surgery on the South Florida Water Management District's $1.5 billion budget.

An internal "financial options" memo produced this month by Thomas Olliff, a Water District assistant executive director, contemplates an array of potential cuts: canceling or postponing nearly a dozen existing Everglades restoration projects, slashing salaries, selling a district plane, closing a laboratory, selling state-owned land, even downsizing the deal again by selling off thousands of acres of U.S. Sugar citrus groves.

Water managers stressed that the memo -- produced, Olliff wrote, with "no filter" -- reflected nothing more than a laundry list intended to help governing board members decide whether the agency can still afford the deal.

``What you're looking at is really cocktail napkin noodling and doodling about everything and anything that might be done, if you wanted to do that," said board Chairman Eric Buermann, who joined Crist Thursday on a tour of the St. Lucie River, which has been trashed by polluted releases from Lake Okeechobee.

Crist's deal, already downsized twice by the deteriorating economy, has been under siege from rival growers Florida Crystals, the Miccosukee Tribe and some state lawmakers. They contend it amounts to a bailout for a struggling and politically influential agriculture giant, and would push back restoration efforts by years or decades.

Tribe attorney Dexter Lehtinen brandished the memo during a federal court hearing this week on Everglades cleanup progress, calling it evidence that water managers would have to raid critical projects to afford the deal.

``What I see on this list is an order to buy the sugar land, no matter how much it costs," Lehtinen said. "It's shocking to say the least."

Henry Dean, a former district executive director who is now a consultant for Florida Crystals and the Florida Sugar Cane Cooperative, said the cuts "would have devastating effects."

POSSIBLE CUTS

The list includes three Miami-Dade projects: $35 million intended to overhaul the C-111 canal, which diverts fresh water from Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, and $7 million to restore freshwater flows to Biscayne Bay.

It also raises the option of selling $60 million in land the state has spent years acquiring in the Bird Drive basin area of West Miami-Dade -- site of a proposed water preserve. Also potentially on the sales block: the L-8 reservoir in western Palm Beach County, rock pits the district purchased in 2003 for more than $200 million in a deal tainted by kickbacks that put two Palm Beach County commissioners in jail.

The Palm Beach Post reported this week that water in the pits, intended to supply both marshes and suburbs, was too brackish for wetlands. Water utilities in Palm Beach and Broward are pondering digging another pit nearby to enhance supplies.

Water District board member Shannon Estenoz, who requested the "financial options" breakdown, said she wanted raw numbers so that board members -- all nine appointed by Crist -- can set priorities rather than put the agency's staff in the crosshairs.

"One of the biggest criticisms of this deal is that it all happens behind closed doors," she said. "I said, 'You guys have to turn it over to the board and let the board make the tough decisions.'"

Estenoz echoed Buermann, saying she would never support cutting jobs or many of the projects, such as a C-111 repair that broke ground this year. But she said the district needed to take a hard look at spending to try to make a deal she and environmentalists consider essential to resolve water pollution and supply problems that have plagued the Glades for decades.

GOING FORWARD

In addition to securing 72,500 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields, the deal includes options to purchase an
additional 107,000 acres for about $794 million. Plans call for converting the land -- at uncertain time and cost -- into reservoirs and pollution-treatment marshes.

Last week, the board unanimously extended an expiring deadline on the deal but acknowledged that bleak financial projections threaten plans to bankroll it with bonds.

An outside financial advisor warned in February that declining property-tax revenues and mounting deficits -- projected to hit $110 million by 2012 -- could limit the credit line and force ``very difficult decisions." On April 7, the Florida Supreme Court is also scheduled to hear an appeal of a lawsuit challenging the bonding plan.

Critics believe the board is under pressure from the governor's office to make the deal happen. Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the governor's point man on the deal, denied any arm-twisting and said the agency was just at the beginning of a budget process that would take months.

``There has been no formal direction in terms of financing," he said in a written statement.

Board chairman Buermann said the agency had only engaged in routine budget discussions with the DEP, which oversees district operations. He also insisted the board wouldn't do the deal, which Crist has called a top environmental priority, if it would bust the budget, or jeopardize restoration or core missions to control flooding and supply water.

``We're not his rubber stamp," Buermann said.

Robert Coker, a U.S. Sugar vice president, said the company has not discussed downsizing options with the district and is focused on the bottom line, not how it might get paid.

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**Exploran nuevas vías para la adquisición de polémicos terrenos**

03/19/2010

El Nuevo Herald.com

Como que la posibilidad de pedir prestados $500,000 millones está cada vez más lejos, los administradores del Distrito Hidráulico del Sur de la Florida decidieron explorar nuevas vías para financiar el acuerdo del gobernador Charlie Crist con la compañía U.S. Sugar Corp., la compra de unos polémicos terrenos que el gobernador continúa apoyando con firmeza, como dejó ver durante una visita que hizo el jueves al sur de la Florida.

Una alternativa que se contempla es pagar gran parte del acuerdo --incluso quizás toda la suma-- de $536 millones en efectivo.

Sin embargo, la entrega del dinero podría obligar a que se realice una reparación seria, y políticamente complicada, del presupuesto de $1,500 millones del distrito.

Un memorando interno sobre `"opciones financieras" que envió este mes Thomas Olliff, director ejecutivo de la agencia, menciona una serie de recortes potenciales: cancelar o posponer casi una docena de proyectos de restauración de los Everglades, eliminar salarios, vender un avión del distrito, cerrar un laboratorio, vender tierras pertenecientes al Estado de la Florida, y hasta bajar el valor del acuerdo al vender millas de hectáreas de sembrados de cítricos de U.S. Sugar.

Los directivos de la agencia señalaron que el memorando --que escribió Olliff, `"sin filtro"-- no es más que una lista cuyo fin es ayudar a los miembros de la junta de gobierno a decidir si la agencia puede o no todavía afrontar el negocio.

``Lo que uno está viendo no son más que conversaciones vacías sobre todas las cosas que deben hacerse, si uno quiere hacerlas", dijo Eric Buermann, miembro de la junta que se unió a Crist el jueves en un recorrido por el río St. Lucie, que ha estado ensuciando de todos los desechos que suelta el lago Okeechobee.

El acuerdo acariciado por Crist, cuyo monto total ya se ha visto reducido dos veces debido a la crisis económica, ha estado bajo el escrutinio de la firma agrícola rival Florida Crystals, la tribu de los indios Miccosukee, y algunos legisladores estatales. Todos afirman que se trata de una ayuda para un gigante agrícola que tiene problemas y cuenta además con formidables influencias políticas, y que demoraría los esfuerzos de restauración años y quizás
Dexter Lehtinen, abogado de los Miccosukee criticó el memorando durante una audiencia federal que tuvo lugar esta semana sobre los avances de la limpieza de los Everglades, y lo llamó una prueba de que los administradores del distrito tendrían que eliminar proyectos críticos para poder llevar a cabo el acuerdo.

Henry Dean, ex director ejecutivo del distrito, que en la actualidad es consultante de Florida Crystals y de Florida Sugar Cane Cooperative, dijo que los recortes `podrían tener efectos devastadores".

La lista incluye tres proyectos en Miami-Dade: $35 millones con los que se busca restaurar el canal C-111, que desvía agua fresca desde el Parque Nacional de los Everglades, y Florida Bay, y otros $7 millones para reparar los conductos de agua fresca que corren hacia la Bahía de Biscayne.

De igual modo la lista saca a relucir la opción de $60 millones en tierras que el Estado ha pasado años adquiriendo en el área de la cuenca de Bird Drive al oeste de Miami-Dade, lugar donde se propuso construir una represa. También aparece como una venta potencial la represa L-8 que está en el oeste del condado Palm Beach, pozos de piedra que el distrito compró en el 2003 por más de $200 millones en un negocio rodeado de obstáculos.

El diario `Palm Beach Post" reportó esta semana que el agua en los pozos, con la que se busca abastecer tanto los pantanos como los suburbios, estaba demasiado contaminada para llevar a las llanuras.

Shannon Estenoz, miembro de la junta del distrito, que solicitó que las `opciones financieras" se dividieran, dijo que quería conocer las cifras crudas, de modo que los miembros de la junta --todos nombrados por Crist-- puedan establecer prioridades en vez de poner en aprietos al personal de la agencia.

Para el 7 de abril está fijado que la Corte Suprema de la Florida escuche una solicitud de apelación de una demanda que impugna el plan de financiamiento mediante bonos.

**OP-ED: Only nature can restore Everglades**
03/19/2010
St. Petersburg Times
Jack Davis

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp. has the familiar anatomy of history repeating itself, in perverse reversal.

A hundred years ago, Gov. Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, donning an ego to match his ancestral name, bullied opponents to push ahead with his plan to drain the Everglades. To pay for it, he sold a half-million acres of state-owned Everglades land at fire-sale prices to a wealthy speculator, who subdivided the land and resold it at a 1,200 percent markup.

A Washington newspaper called the deal "one of the biggest land swindles in history," eerily anticipating criticism of the U.S. Sugar purchase, which includes original land Broward sold to the speculator. Like the Crist plan, Broward's plan was twisted up with ego, greed and politics. Like Crist, Broward was a governor who wanted to be a U.S. senator (he failed in two bids).

But the more important historical redundancy is this: No politician, from Broward to Crist, whether pursuing drainage or restoration, has stepped outside anthropomorphic boundaries to comprehend the Everglades on its own terms, to leave nature to determine the conditions that allow the River of Grass to flourish.

Nothing more than lousy consequences has come from trying to re-engineer America's greatest wetland.

Meddling led to a tragic outcome when the state encouraged thousands to settle below a feeble containment dike along the southern rim of Lake Okeechobee, in the natural flow-way to the lower Glades. A hurricane in 1928 breached the dike, and some 2,000 people drowned.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers launched a "comprehensive" flood-control project in 1948, creating a slow-motion environmental disaster. Extended out two decades, the project bulldozed the natural ecosystem of the Everglades into a fossil-fuel-powered artificial one and opened land for the expansion of sugar growing.
Engineered nature remained the ruling principle when the Clinton-Gore administration introduced the new era of restoration. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan of 2000 relied on secret meetings, unproven science and the Corps of Engineers' mechanistic dominion. The plan let agriculture stay put in the natural flow-way.

This last flaw is what Crist wishes to correct, and this is a commendable goal.

Yet Crist is charging ahead with a plan that restores past practices, not natural flow. Like those before, his is a complex scheme of engineering that depends on mechanical devices and continued intervention, so embedded in our sense of human superiority is our desire to control nature.

Only the wise trust the wisdom of nature. Leaving it to govern may seem a foolish Thoreauvian romanticism, but consider these facts.

Nature has a remarkable facility for rebounding from hurricanes, fires or earthquakes. Within a few years of scalding life from its sides, Mount St. Helens was turning green again. Nature has demonstrated similar wherewithal to overcome human impingement. Scientists are constantly impressed by the speed with which a damaged ecosystem begins to thrive when insulting sources have been removed.

Closer to the subject, the floral and faunal response after the state reopened impounded oxbows of the former Kissimmee River and left things alone was equivalent to springtime rejuvenation.

Scientists, and especially engineers, are incapable of restoring the Everglades. For one, remaking an ecology cannot be done with pumps and dikes and manufactured conservation areas, contrivances that the Crist plan retains.

For another, ecosystems are in constant flux, and flux is central to a system's good health. What the Everglades was before Broward is not what it would be today, in the absence of civilization's historic meddling or not. The methods scientists have thus far imagined for restoration are no less artificial than methods imagined by politicians.

Only nature can restore the Everglades.

So let Crist buy his land, but do not let him muck it up with the expensive technologies of engineered restoration. Buy more land instead, and more land until every restraint against natural restoration has been removed. Then step back and allow the Everglades to find its flow again.

This strategy may sound impossible; in truth, if restoration is the real goal, nothing else is possible.

Jack E. Davis is associate professor of history and Waldo W. Neikirk 2009-10 Term Professor at the University of Florida. He is the author of An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century.

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Crist's Everglades sugar deal bogs down in fiscal swamp
03/19/2010
St. Petersburg Times - Online
With odds of borrowing a half-billion bucks growing dicey, water managers are exploring new ways to finance Gov. Charlie Crist's deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp. — a controversial land buy he stood firmly behind Thursday during a South Florida visit.

One possible alternative: pay for much, maybe all, of the $536 million price tag in cash. But that could require major, and politically messy, cuts to the South Florida Water Management District's $1.5 billion budget.

An internal "financial options" memo produced this month by a water district executive contemplates an array of potential cuts: canceling or postponing nearly a dozen Everglades restoration projects, slashing salaries, selling a plane, closing a laboratory, selling state-owned land, downsizing the deal by selling thousands of acres of U.S. Sugar groves.

Water managers said the memo is just intended to help board members decide whether they can still afford the deal.

Crist's deal, already downsized twice, has been under siege from rival sugar growers, the Miccosukee Tribe and some state lawmakers who say it amounts to a bailout for a struggling, influential agriculture giant, and would set back restoration efforts.

Tribe attorney Dexter Lehtinen brandished the memo at a federal court hearing on Everglades cleanup, calling it "an order to buy the sugar land, no matter how much it costs."

Water board chairman Eric Buermann said the agency wouldn't do the deal if it would bust the budget, or jeopardize restoration, flood control and supply water. "We're not his rubber stamp," Buermann said.

In addition to securing 72,500 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields, the deal includes options to buy 107,000 acres for about $794 million. Plans call for converting the land into reservoirs and water-treatment marshes.

Last week, the board extended an expiring deadline on the deal but acknowledged that bleak financial projections threaten plans to bankroll it with bonds.

An outside financial adviser has warned that declining property tax revenue and mounting deficits could limit the credit line and force "very difficult decisions." And on April 7, the state Supreme Court is set to hear an appeal of a lawsuit challenging the bonding plan.

Robert Coker, a U.S. Sugar vice president, said the company has not discussed downsizing options with the district and is focused on the bottom line, not how it might get paid.

"We're a seller," he said. "It doesn't matter if it is a bank check, a money order, a cashier's check, a personal check or cash."

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**Governor Pushes Everglades On Treasure Coast Trip**

03/18/2010

WPBF-TV

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STUART, Fla. -- His days as governor may be winding down, but that doesn't mean Charlie Crist isn't still trying to get things done as Florida's leading man.

Crist was making stops in three Treasure Coast cities Thursday.

The purpose of Crist's visit is to continue his focus on protecting the Everglades. Crist, who is running for Senate, helped broker the deal to purchase U.S. Sugar land for Everglades restoration.

First, Crist toured the St. Lucie River in Stuart with Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole.

Both spoke about the importance of Everglades restoration.

"We have identified that critical acreage for water storage and actually water quality improvements, so we were very tactical and focused about which acreage we needed to acquire to achieve those goals," Sole said.

Crist said the land purchase was downsized because of the economy, but added that he and Sole have "identified the pieces that we think are important to begin restoring the natural water flow and we had to get started, so here we are."

He will then visit Indian River State College in Fort Pierce at 12:30 p.m.

His final stop is at the Indian River County Chamber of Commerce in Vero Beach at 2 p.m.

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SWEET AND SOUR PORK
03/18/2010
Sun Sentinel

Of course we all have a loose sort of idea of how big an acre is. But just in case, it's 43,560 square feet. That's a lot of yard to mow.

OK, now envision the watered-down deal our governor wants to make with U.S. Sugar Corp., that giant company situated on the edge of the Everglades.

We're talking about paying U.S. Sugar $536 million for 72,800 acres. On those acres are citrus trees and, of course, sugarcane. Huh? That's the watered-down deal?

Yes, it is. The original proposal 20 months ago was to pay $1.75 billion to buy the whole U.S. Sugar empire. When legal challenges started to spring up, this new deal surfaced. As structured, the state - that's us - would buy the 72,800 acres now and would have a 10-year option to buy another 107,000 acres. And get this: U.S. Sugar would continue operations for up to 20 years. That's another, "huh?"

Here we are, with a state whose deficit is increasing every day, and we're supposed to come up with a quick $536 million, plus more to come? The governor says we'd "borrow" the money, with property owners right here in South Florida paying off the long-term debt. Crist told The Miami Herald, "It's a done deal." Neat, eh?

Right now, it's as mixed-up a deal as we've seen lately. This past week was supposed to be the deadline for a yes or no on the contract, but that's about to become a historical nonfact. Opponents of the deal, ranging from the Miccosukees to other sugar companies to us, seem to care less about the pollution all the runoffs can cause than about the reality of the shrinking tax base that's supposed to pay off all this money.

Some background: The lawyer for the Miccosukees, a former political figure on his own, says the state not only can't afford this transaction but can't afford all the restoration that's supposed to follow. Add to this a factor not often publicized - that to restore the Everglades, the state would have to buy additional land at a cost whose wild estimates range from $3 billion to $30 billion - and you can see a muddy future no matter what the early result might be.

You have to hand it to the governor. While on his honeymoon, he phoned members of the Water District board and
gained a 4-3 vote to keep this deal alive. But now, with statistics showing that the tax base in Broward County is shrinking, along with Palm Beach and Miami-Dade, a word that doesn't describe this negotiation is "popular." Taxpayers see only the huge nut they'll have to pay for.

And the governor doesn't have even a fraction of the negotiating power he had a couple of years ago. He's lame-duck and slipping behind in his race for a seat in the U.S. Senate. His weaponry is his continued ability to appoint members to various boards and supervisory positions affecting the spending of $536 million that the state doesn't have.

Well, we'll see. There's much to be said for replacing the dumping of pollution with restoration of the original Everglades. Oh yes, that's the happy theory. But if U.S. Sugar can still work the land for 20 years, the theory is one that our grandchildren might analyze and shake their heads over.

Hey, don't you wish somebody had offered you thousands of acres bordering the Everglades, half a century or so ago? You'd be sitting pretty.

Herschell Gordon Lewis is an author, director, and longtime Broward resident. E-mail eastsider@tribune.com.

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BLOG: Crist keeps pushing for U.S. Sugar land deal
03/18/2010
Sun Sentinel - Online
Reid, Andy

Gov. Charlie Crist on Thursday toured the St. Lucie River to keep up his sales pitch for a $536 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

The governor proposes buying 73,000 acres of farmland south of Lake Okeechobee that would be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows to the Everglades.

The deal passed a critical hurdle last week when the South Florida Water Management District agreed to a six-month contract extension with U.S. Sugar, despite growing cost concerns.

Opponents say the plan to borrow $536 million – with South Florida property payers paying off the long-term debt – costs too much and takes money away from other overdue Everglades restoration projects.

Crist's trip Thursday in Martin County was meant to draw attention to how the land deal could eventually improve the health of coastal estuaries, in addition to the Everglades.

Storing and treating more polluted stormwater on U.S. Sugar land could diminish the damaging flood control discharges from Lake Okeechobee, through the St. Lucie River to the coast. Those discharges have led to fish kills and damaged sea grasses.

"The well-being of the St. Lucie River and estuary is of great importance to Florida's economy and quality of life," Crist said in a written statement.

The U.S. Sugar land deal still faces a legal challenge, going before the Florida Supreme Court on April 7. If the Supreme Court endorses the deal, the South Florida Water Management District still needs to find a lender and must determine if it can ultimately afford the deal amid diminishing tax revenue.

Gov. Crist tours St. Lucie River estuary | Video
03/18/2010
TCPalm.com
Tyler Treadway
STUART — Gov. Charlie Crist on Thursday took his campaign to restore the Everglades onto the waters of the St. Lucie River estuary.

"The St. Lucie River watershed is an essential component to the northern Everglades ecosystem," Crist said at Sunset Bay Marina before boarding a pontoon boat for a tour of the river.

Crist lauded the unanimous vote a week ago by the South Florida Water Management District's governing board to extend the deadline for negotiations to buy 73,000 acres of farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. to help restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. An important by-product of the proposed "flow way" would be to prevent disastrous releases from Lake O into the St. Lucie River Estuary and Indian River Lagoon like those five years ago that turned water bright green and devastated aquatic life.

Once on the boat, Crist could see the chocolate-brown river water, not from Okeechobee but the result of releases from canals that control runoff from recent rains.

"It's pathetic," Crist said as Mark Perry, executive director of the Stuart-based Florida Oceanographic Society explained how Lake O discharges had all but wiped out the estuary's oyster population.

"I know in my heart that this is the right thing to do," Crist said of the sugar land deal.

Replying to critics who say the deal, which calls for the water management district to borrow $536 million, with South Florida property owners paying off the long-term debt, is too expensive, especially in tough economic times, Crist said, "We can't afford not to do it. When are we going to get this kind of golden opportunity again? We're at the precipice of doing something truly great."

Crist noted the deal has been cut from a $1.75 billion purchase of twice as much land since he first proposed it in June 2008 because of economic concerns.

"In the end (the purchase) is cheaper than building all the dikes and dams that had been proposed (for Everglades restoration)," he said. "And it's hard to argue against restoring the flow to the way God intended it."

About 20 people, mostly local politicians and environmental activists, accompanied Crist on the boat ride; and two police boats followed behind.

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**Editorial: Politics and the environment**

03/18/2010

Pensacola News Journal

Decades of environmental recklessness have left us depending on the political system to fix problems. And that often creates a bigger mess.

It confirms an old truth: Do it right the first time, and you don't have to fix it later.

Like the Everglades.

Since the 1800s Floridians have abused this world-class ecosystem that, left to itself, created a natural paradise, abundant in water and wildlife. Despite expensive, long-term efforts to drain and control it, and the poisoning of it through pollution, the Everglades has hung on.

In recent decades, even the most conservative politicians — like former Gov. Jeb Bush — have realized the error and dedicated billions of dollars to fixing it.

Now Gov. Charlie Crist is in hot water for his proposed deal to buy huge parcels of land from U.S. Sugar and restore them to something resembling their natural condition.

Does he deserve the criticism? Yes and no.

The deal is now much smaller — largely due to the recession cutting available revenue — and worse, more suspect. Behind-the-scenes maneuvering leaves the impression of questionable decisions and that the deal has become more about saving U.S. Sugar than the Everglades. Especially since the latest package leaves gaps between parcels — a
questionable approach given that a primary goal is to reconnect large swaths of land to restore natural water flow.

Also, buying the land stresses the budget of the South Florida Water Management District, which will finance it, and postpones or cancels other projects that were considered crucial to Everglades restoration.

But environmentalists are rallying to support the deal, saying that even in its smaller form it is good for the Everglades.

Meanwhile, George LeMieux, Crist's former chief of staff and appointee to the U.S. Senate seat vacated by Mel Martinez, popped up with a chance to profit from the negotiations. He says he won't take any money from the deal, but his law firm, which represents U.S. Sugar, will.

But one of the prime critics turns out to be Jeb Bush — which raises questions about his role.

Bush is said to be smarting because Crist abandoned Bush's restoration plan, which critics say was based on risky, unproven technology, and more about providing water for development than restoring a natural Everglades.

Bush is also tied to Marco Rubio, running against Crist for the Senate. And both Bush and Rubio are tied to U.S. Sugar's competitors, Florida Crystals, which is opposed to the deal and to restoring the Everglades because it could hurt its operations.

So doing the right thing — restoring the Everglades — is hung up in a political cat fight that would have been unnecessary if Florida had simply done the right thing from the beginning.

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**OP-ED: U.S. Sugar deal: Score one victory over 'pollution establishment'**

03/18/2010
Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers
Karl Wickstrom

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.
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**OP-ED: Sugar deal has turned sour**

03/18/2010

Miami Herald, The

Paula Dockery

Friends of the Everglades were understandably excited when Florida Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled a $1.75 billion deal to buy out U.S. Sugar two years ago, effectively closing down a major polluter of the Everglades.

But much has changed -- and been revealed -- since the deal was announced. Given what is known today, the South Florida Water Management District should shelve this sweetheart deal for U.S. Sugar and explore other options.

Here's why:

- The purchase, since downsized, no longer includes the most important tracts needed to restore the Everglades' natural flow way. The six land tracts under contract don't even connect.

- U.S. Sugar will not go out of business, as first reported. Instead, it will continue to farm the lands essential for restoration for up to 20 years, getting an exclusive lease at less-than-market rates.

- To come up with the purchase price, SFWMD has delayed -- perhaps for decades -- almost a dozen Everglades-restoration projects, including a reservoir that's already cost taxpayers more than $300 million.

- After state appraisers raised concerns about the sale being vastly overpriced, political insiders changed the rules to cut them out of the loop.

- Since the surprise deal was revealed, other sugar companies have expressed an interest in selling their lands, too, including more-essential acres needed for restoration. And don't forget that a private company has offered to buy the U.S. Sugar property and sell back whatever is needed to help the Everglades -- an interesting option.

- To pay U.S. Sugar, the district's financial consultant says operating and maintenance budgets must be slashed, an unacceptable consequence.

- Similarly, property taxes likely will rise for homeowners and businesses in the 16 counties served by SFWMD, something that has yet to be publicly addressed.

Yes, much has changed since this deal was announced. Newspapers have reported cozy deal-making, over-the-top appraisals and pending tax increases -- wrapped in the flag of Everglades restoration.
I have a strong record of conservation. I was the sponsor of the Everglades Restoration bill that created the bonding authority for its restoration, as well as legislation that created the Florida Forever land-preservation program. But the U.S. Sugar deal represents reckless public policy, drawn by a governor's office that only had eyes for one politically powerful company.

If we can't renegotiate this deal to purchase only the lands necessary at a price that makes sense, we should scrap it and start over. At a minimum, the leased lands should be opened up to competitors to get a fair-market price.

If the water management district cares about restoration, it should use the six-month contract-extension time to consider other options, including the offer from private industry to buy the land and sell the state only what's needed for restoration.

Paula Dockery, a Republican state senator from Lakeland, is a candidate for governor.

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**LETTER: Everglades Land Purchase**

03/18/2010
New York Times
Eric Draper

To the Editor:

"Deal to Save Everglades May Help Sugar Firm" (front page, March 8) offered a chronological account of the negotiations by the State of Florida to purchase lands from the United States Sugar Corporation, including acreage in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

While the article questioned the cost of this purchase, it did not thoroughly discuss the significant benefits this acquisition would provide to South Florida's sensitive environment and freshwater resources.

When the state and federal governments committed 10 years ago to restoring the Everglades, adequate land needed to treat, store and convey freshwater south from Lake Okeechobee through the Everglades Agricultural Area to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay was unavailable.

The alternative to land is expensive and energy-intensive underground injection wells that have never been shown to work on a large scale. Getting land now used for sugarcane is the only option, regardless of price.

The proposed acquisition opens the way to flow more water south in a manner that more closely mimics nature and replaces the need for and the cost of hundreds of manmade wells. The acquisition also opens the way to replenishing parched wetlands, reviving natural plant communities and healing habitat so important to struggling bird and wildlife populations.

We have made significant progress on restoring the Everglades, an ecosystem that exists nowhere else in the world. Neither we nor our children can afford to let this opportunity pass us by.

Eric Draper
Executive Director
Audubon of Florida
Miami, March 10, 2010

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**BLOG: Which New York Times do we believe?**

03/17/2010
Orlando Sentinel - Online
Thomas, Mike
Last week, a marvelous investigative report by the Times demonstrated how taxpayers are getting fleeced in this deal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp.’s land for Everglades restoration. I wrote about it Tuesday. We are vastly overpaying for property from a company that is desperate to get rid of it. Read for yourself.

Of course, this all may become moot because the state can’t afford it. It should be time to go back to the bargaining table with U.S. Sugar and renegotiate more reasonable terms. I have a feeling the company would have little choice. Given its financial difficulties, I think the only long-term alternative for U.S. Sugar other than a deal with the state may be bankruptcy or a takeover. But no, the state is going full-steam ahead, planning to buy land at vastly inflated values using money it doesn’t have.

Now, helping U.S. Sugar out is the N.Y. Times editorial board, which obviously does not read the N.Y. Times. It came out today with an editorial entitled, “A good deal for the Everglades.”

Back in the 1600s, the Times said this about $24 in trinkets for Manhattan: “A good deal for the natives.”

Under the Times Everglades editorial you will see the words “Past Coverage.”

There you are supposed to see links to the most recent Everglades stories published by the Times. But there is no link to the story I’ve linked above. The Times runs a major investigative piece taking up two inside pages on the jump – a massive amount of prime real estate in The Gray Lady – and the editorial page doesn't even link to it?

Doesn’t even acknowledge the newspaper’s investigation in the editorial? Doesn't even acknowledge the story exists? Is the editorial page telling us the news division is not to be believed?

Interestingly enough, the editorial page does link to a story saying the South Florida Water District extended the deadline for the purchase. Because that agrees with the editorial. I’ve been around long enough to know a conflict between news and editorial when I see it. But since when does editorial try to quelch the news?

What the heck is going on over at the Times?

When it comes to the Glades, I suppose the ends justify the ripoff. Although I’m not convinced that buying this land ends well given the marginal benefits this land has for the restoration effort and the financial hole it puts the South Florida Water Management District in.

I would like to see the Florida Auditor General review the land appraisals, which appear deliberately inflated to grease the skids for this deal. Then we go back to U.S. Sugar and put a more reasonable offer on the table.

BLOG: NYTimes: A Good Deal for the Everglades
03/17/2010
Palm Beach Post - Online
Bender, Michael

From the New York Times editorial board this morning:

Some environmentalists complained that Mr. Crist paid too much and that the cost of the deal would crowd out other restoration projects.

But some of those projects — a string of underground storage wells, for instance — made little sense to begin with and none are as important as the land deal. The payout to United States Sugar and some other aspects of the deal seem excessive. But the agency can negotiate the price downward or cancel the arrangement if United States Sugar refuses to bargain or if the economy keeps tanking and the deal becomes unaffordable.

What the taxpayers need to remember is that this is a very good deal for the environment. Without an ample supply of clean, fresh water, the Everglades will never be restored to anything approaching their former vitality.
Environmentalists are cheering this morning's New York Times editorial, which praises Gov. Charlie Crist's $536 million plan to buy 73,000 acres of farmland for U.S. Sugar Corp. as "a very good deal for the environment." The endorsement comes a little more than a week after the Times published a huge, front-page investigative piece that said the opposite was true — specifically, that the "price tag and terms of the deal could set back Everglades restoration for years, or even decades."

Confused, yet? Stay with me here. The editorial essentially concedes that the payout to U.S. Sugar may "seem excessive" and that the cost may force other Everglades restoration projects underway to be canceled. But, the Times' editorial board says, those other projects were of questionable benefit and relied on questionable science (including, but not limited to, the concept of burying water).

Buying land in the sugar farming region south of Lake Okeechobee, which Everglades scientists have been recommending for decades, essentially allows for the water managers to, once again, flow water downhill from the lake.

That's the way it used to work before the government ditched, diked and dammed most of South Florida, once a giant, uninhabitable, southward-flowing marsh from south of Orlando to Florida Bay. And that's why supporters equate this deal — which the editorial labels "game-changing" — to the purchase of a Alaska or a new national park. Sure, U. S. Sugar may be laughing all the way to the bank. But to most Everglades scientists, any deal is better than no deal. To use real estate parlance, there are no "comparables."

One minor problem lingers: it's not clear that the South Florida Water Management District can afford it. Expect heated debates in the coming months, as the agency decides whether the numbers add up, given the dismal economy and sinking tax revenues. The Times even suggests the state could negotiate the price downward or cancel, if necessary. (An "opt-out clause" would theoretically allow the state to do just that.)

Then there's the question of how to pay for the actual restoration works that would need to be built on the land: artificial marshes, reservoirs, canals, etc. But first things first, says the Times. The U.S. Sugar deal, it says, is a "critically important first step."

Judge to Rule on Two Issues Impacting Everglades Cleanup

Mar. 16--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.

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OPINION: Big Promises, No Cash Sour Crist's Everglades Deal
03/17/2010
Southeast Construction
Mike Thomas
digital wire

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.

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Florida given more time to buy Everglade sugar lands for conservation

03/17/2010
Web4Water
Sam Bond

Water authorities in South Florida have voted to extend a contract that allows public money to be used to buy land held by the state's sugar barons in an attempt to preserve the much-pressured Everglades.

The mono-culture growing of sugar cane and its processing cause huge environmental damage to the Everglades, which also face challenges from over-development.

The original deal, brokered by state Governor Charlie Crist, allowed the state to buy back land used for growing sugar cane and halt the farming.

It received a mixed response, with political rivals accusing Crist of cronyism, as his campaign was heavily supported financially by the sugar industry.

Nevertheless, regardless of political motivation, there are undoubted environmental benefits.

This week the South Florida Water Management District voted to extend the scheme, which was due to have expired, to the end of September.


"I applaud the courage of the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District for standing firm and acting in Florida's best interest.

"Their unanimous vote to extend the contract has set us on a course that will change the history of Florida for the better. I thank the members for recognizing the enormous restoration potential this acquisition represents, and for their commitment to doing so without raising taxes.

"Every Floridian of this generation and future generations will benefit from restoring the natural flow of the River of Grass."