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**Fla. Should Re-Do Sugar Purchase**
03/22/2010
Ledger, 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 US. 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 - nearly 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 over-priced, 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 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 will likely 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.

Just so you know, 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.

[ Paula Dockery is a Republican state senator and gubernatorial candidate from Lakeland. ]
In his commentary on Tuesday, Orlando Sentinel columnist Mike Thomas called the purchase of U.S. Sugar Corp. land "disastrous" ("Big promises, no cash sour Glades deal"). As chairman of the Everglades Trust, I would like to offer a different viewpoint.

Thomas, an otherwise excellent reporter and columnist, seems to rely largely on a recent "opus," as he calls it, in The New York Times. After intensive examination, research and consideration of all sides of this discussion, a subsequent Times editorial strongly endorsed the purchase plan, calling it a "good deal" for the Everglades.

The article Thomas cites was clearly set up to establish potential problems and concerns, but in the end, Times' editorial writers thought the benefits clearly outweighed those concerns.

The Everglades system is one of the world's greatest natural treasures, despoiled by decades of ill-conceived drainage and farming practices. At the heart of the problem are the giant cane fields feeding Florida's sugar industry. Buying this land takes it out of sugar production permanently. That alone would eliminate much of the agricultural activity that now poisons the River of Grass.

Under the ownership and oversight of the South Florida Water Management District, the property will be an ideal and cost-efficient location for water storage and treatment. This treatment is essential for removing harmful pollutants and nutrients from the water before it enters Everglades National Park.

In fact, Florida will be ordered by the federal courts to clean up this water, so we will either invest in the land necessary to accomplish that or pay for many more expensive and untested procedures for many years to come.

If this purchase plan fails, Florida taxpayers might be forced to purchase the property through an exponentially more costly condemnation action. If U.S. Sugar Corp. sells this property in parcels — as is likely if this purchase falls through — the state will face an even worse fiscal nightmare in dealing with multiple property owners.

On the other hand, if we act now to purchase the U.S. Sugar Corp. property, we can jumpstart the important work of Everglades restoration, not only saving money, but putting thousands of Floridians to work.

It will have the added benefit of providing and protecting the water supply for 7 million of our fellow citizens in South Florida.

After reviewing the proposal's terms and conditions and evaluating the appraisals and the economic benefits, we are convinced that this is our best chance to save America's Everglades.

It would be a heartbreaking irony if a faction of the sugar industry and its cohorts were to spoil this unprecedented opportunity.

Floridians want and expect better than that. When asked, an overwhelming majority of them say that restoring the Everglades should be one of the state's top environmental concerns. The current plan is a good one. It is good for the Everglades, it is good for Florida Bay, and it is especially good for taxpayers.

Thom Rumberger is chairman of the Everglades Trust in Islamorada.

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Ed Killer: Governor visits St. Lucie River; Why bother?
03/21/2010
Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers
Killer, Edward
On a bright, steamy June morning in 2008, a glorious day in the future of Florida's environmental history unfolded on the edge of marsh.

Almost.

Gov. Charlie Crist, beaming his well-tanned ear-to-ear smile, marched to the portable dais with a well-kept secret tucked in his back pocket. Under the warm mid-morning sun, with coots and great egrets and mottled ducks watching from the cattails and bulrushes, and about 200 human witnesses wondering why we were all there, Crist proudly announced what he hoped would become his legacy.

And it has.

Succeed or fail.

Or depending on how one looks at things, half-succeed or half-fail.

The promise that day involved the state's buyout of U.S. Sugar Corporation's land, refinery and other property for an agreed upon $1.8 billion. The land, connected to other agricultural lands, would eventually be converted to a slow-flowing, shallow marsh with native aquatic vegetation to cleanse and purify water as it made its way from the Kissimmee River floodplain through Lake Okeechobee across the restored marsh and down to Florida Bay.

U.S. Sugar CEO Robert Coker had the nerve to say the decision to urge his shareholders to sell had so much to do with the company's desire to be part of the effort to restore the Everglades.

The back-slapping and glad-handing that day by politicians and people running for office of one kind or another was hard to stomach. As a native of Martin County, it was difficult to stand there 80 miles from the shores of the St. Lucie River and believe what I was hearing.

It just seemed too good to be true.

It was.

Crist toured the St. Lucie River on Thursday for the second time in his term. He and officials with the South Florida Water Management District, Department of Environmental Protection and other organizations and agencies all held hands on a pontoon boat tour and pledged to finish saving the river.

Spare me.

Forgive my cynicism, but I've been searching for something positive to tell my children about efforts to save the river. Can't do it yet.

They would love to hear about a hero who finally shut off the Army Corps of Engineers' forever leaking faucet.

It won't be federal Judge Lynn Bush. She ruled in January that the Rivers Coalition lawsuit did not meet requirements for a statute of limitations on the damage done by releases from Lake Okeechobee. I think if she lived in Lighthouse Point she might feel different.

It won't be the Army Corps who will certainly fling the floodgates open again once the rains come again. If their office was in Rio instead of Jacksonville, they might control the water much more equitably.

It won't be the Martin County Commission which has yet to take a stance of substance against the agencies that manage, check that, I mean mismanage, the estuary.

It won't be the South Florida Water Management District that despite its claims does have a say in the quality of water that enters the estuary.

It won't be the Environmental Protection Agency that could halt the polluting releases at any time with the influence of the Clean Water Act.

This battle has been going on since the St. Lucie Lock and Dam was completed. Two generations of river activists have fought with little gain. Another two generations will likely fight and pass on before the river will be free from silt and nutrient-laden runoff again.

Crist's original pitch has already been whittled to half its hoped-for size. Acquisition costs could bankrupt the SFWMD
and state for decades. Legal challenges alone from other sugar companies, tribes and other groups will stall the effort indefinitely.

Eventually that humid morning in June will disappear from memory altogether, along with Crist's promises and his legacy.

Tournament time

Spring may actually finally arrive soon, which means the summer fishing tournament season cannot be far behind. The Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers annual fishing tournament calendar will print in the Sports section and will be online at TCPalm.com on Friday.

Organizations should send in all tournament information including dates, time and location of captain's briefing including address, awards, fishing times, species, entry fees, payouts and/or prizes, eligible anglers, beneficiaries, contact numbers, Web site, e-mail and any other pertinent information.

Information should be emailed to edward.killer@scripps.com, faxed to (772) 600-1532 or mailed to Scripps Newspapers, Attn: Ed Killer, 1939 S.E. Federal Highway, Stuart, FL 34994 or call (772) 221-4201.

Ed Killer is a columnist for Scripps Treasure Coast Newspapers. This column reflects his opinion. For more on Outdoors and Fishing topics, follow his blog at www.tcpalm.com/killer. Contact him at (772) 221-4201 or edward.killer@scripps.com.

Brent Batten: Republican Dockery takes on GOP establishment in run for governor

03/20/2010
Naples Daily News
Batten, Brent

A Republican woman not afraid to call out corruption within her own party aspires against long odds to the office of governor.

Move aside, Sarah Palin, there's someone else trying out for the role.

State Sen. Paula Dockery of Lakeland is trying to do in Florida what Palin did in Alaska, ascend to the state's highest office with a message of reform that takes on not just the opposing party but her own as well.

Dockery was in Naples earlier this month to try to convince local Republicans that she is a better choice than Attorney General Bill McCollum, who has more money and better name recognition.

The party primary looms in August giving Dockery limited time to catch up, especially since she can't actively solicit contributions during the legislative session, which is scheduled to last until early May.

Dockery would have been forced out of her Senate seat in 2012 by term limits. "It was my intention to go home to live a happy life," Dockery said of her plans after that.

But two issues surfaced that she couldn't ignore. One was a proposed deal between the state and CSX railway to provide commuter rail service in Central Florida. The $1 billion deal would have amounted to a taxpayer subsidy for CSX's freight operation, Dockery argued.

The deal, which Dockery maintains was negotiated in secret, would have also stuck taxpayers with the liability for accidents on the rail lines, even those caused by CSX. Even with the support of the Legislature's Republican leaders and Gov. Charlie Crist, the deal was eventually derailed with Dockery leading the opposition. Dockery likens the CSX deal with a proposal to lease Alligator Alley between Naples and Fort Lauderdale to a private firm, which she also believes has been shrouded in secrecy. The deal is dormant for now, as economic conditions have discouraged the private sector from taking on the lease. If opponents of the deal aren't diligent, it could resurface as the economy improves, she warned. "I'd love to make it (the legislation authorizing the lease) go away," she said.

The second issue was, and is, the proposed state purchase of thousands of acres of U.S. Sugar land for Everglades
A crisis-level funding plan prepared for the South Florida Water Management District could adversely impact the long-delayed C-111 Canal project designed to improve water quality in Taylor Slough and Florida Bay.

The Miami Herald reported Friday that the scaled-back Everglades plan promoted by Gov. Charlie Crist is now running into funding problems, chiefly how to borrow the $500 million needed to buy land from U.S. Sugar.

We should not be surprised at this latest turn of events, which puts nearshore waters in the Florida Keys lower on the state’s priority list to address.

Mike Collins, an Islamorada backcountry fishing guide who served on the district’s governing board, warned of this back in 2008.

He said then the governor’s ambitious plan to buy up 182,000 acres of sugar and citrus fields south of Lake Okeechobee wouldn’t fix the Everglades.

“The Everglades system doesn’t work the way it used to,” Collins told the Keynoter. “It’s a myth that getting more land will make it work. We’ve found that’s not true. The system is on life support, and we’re going to have to pump water to storage areas.”

According to the crisis plan prepared for the district, cuts to existing Everglades projects -- including $35 million intended to overhaul the C-111 Canal on the Monroe-Miami-Dade line -- could be at risk.

This bad news comes on the heels of a controversial vote last week when the district governing board extended the deadline on the U.S. Sugar deal, while admitting the current financial climate makes the cost of borrowing the money...
prohibitive.

Back in 2008, the grand plan carried a $1.34 billion price tag. But critics cried foul, saying negotiators failed to challenge the amount of land needed and cost per acre.

Since that botched initial deal, the scope of the purchase and the price per acre have both been reduced. But it still leaves taxpayers in 16 counties, including Monroe, facing a huge half-billion-dollar price tag.

And worse, it puts at risk other water quality restoration projects already underway, including the C-111 canal work.

That should be alarming and here's why:

The C-111 Canal, finished in 1968, was designed mainly as a flood-control safety valve. Unfortunately, it proved to be too deep and too effective at moving massive amounts of surface water directly to the sea. As a result, it drained more than half of the headwaters for Taylor Slough, which is considered the primary source of fresh water for Florida Bay.

And it's that balance of saline and fresh water that makes Florida Bay a breeding ground for all kinds of marine species. Not proceeding to fix the C-111 Canal means no help for Florida Bay.

It's not too late for the district board to step back or significantly amend the ill-advised U.S. Sugar deal.

But time is running out and if the sugar deal proceeds, it will suck up all the funds available for many more critical water-quality needs throughout our region.

Commentary: Jeb Bush blurs record on environment
03/20/2010
Palm Beach Post

Jeb Bush became very good at creating his own parallel political universe when he was governor, but he outdid himself with his criticism this month of the U.S. Sugar deal and Gov. Crist.

Speaking to The New York Times, Mr. Bush said of the deal, "On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy."

Now, you can have a pretty good debate about whether the South Florida Water Management District should buy those 73,000 acres. But Mr. Bush is the last person to be blasting another politician for "photo-op environmental policy," since that's all Florida ever got during his eight years in Tallahassee.

In 1999, Mr. Bush and his Department of Environmental Protection secretary, David Struhs, paddled a canoe — before cameras — down the Ichetucknee River in North Florida. They promised to protect the river. A year later, at Mr. Struhs' urging, Mr. Bush allowed a cement plant to be built near the river. As for Mr. Struhs, he left the DEP to work for International Paper, a polluter he helped while on the public payroll.

In January 2002, Mr. Bush — up for reelection that year — and his brother staged a photo-op in the Oval Office. They signed the "agreement between the Bushes." Supposedly, that pledge made the federal government a 50-50 partner with the state in Everglades restoration.

Mr. Bush got his second term, but Florida never got the money. In 2004, Mr. Bush approved a plan for the water district to spend $1.5 billion for Everglades projects Washington had not started. That deal is one reason why the U.S. Sugar deal would test the water district's finances.

Mr. Bush blasted Gov. Crist to help Marco Rubio. As with his own photo-ops, Mr. Bush presented a distorted picture.
Water managers brainstorm salary cuts, land sales to free up money for Everglades purchase

03/20/2010
Palm Beach Post
Quinlan, Paul

Growing concern that the state may struggle to finance Gov. Charlie Crist's half-billion-dollar Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. has water managers brainstorming ways to free up cash for the historic conservation land purchase.

The latest exercise: inventory potential cuts to the water agency's billion-dollar budget.

A March 9 memo made public this week itemized numerous ways the district could save money, including trimming salaries, halting existing restoration projects, selling an agency airplane and closing a laboratory.

Also listed for potential sale are the massive rock pits in western Palm Beach County that mining company Palm Beach Aggregates sold the agency for almost $220 million in 2003.

South Florida Water Management District board chairman Eric Buermann characterized the list as an intellectual exercise, calling it part of the "budgetary war games," "hypotheticals" and "what-if's" now being reviewed.

Board member Shannon Estenoz requested the breakdown in advance of intensive budget workshops scheduled to begin in April, which will largely determine how and if the water agency can afford the $536 million, 73,000 farmland purchase.

Most environmentalists hold the land deal in higher esteem than almost any other single Everglades restoration project now under way for its potential to fundamentally change the overall restoration plan for the better, they say — a step toward restoring the historic, flowing connection between Lake Okeechobee and the southern Everglades.

The memo is a "sort of a raw, unbridled, unfiltered exercise, taking all blinders off, taking off all constraints, running wild through the budget," Buermann said.

But Dexter Lehtinen, attorney for the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, accused the agency of turning its back on projects once declared essential to the ecosystem, specifically citing the rock pits potential sale listed at $250 million.

"It's really amazing that what they convinced everyone was an environmentally critical project just a few years ago is now a marginal project of little importance," said Lehtinen. "If they are right today, they were wrong yesterday, and it means we can't trust them at all."

A Feb. 17 memo from the district's financial adviser on the sugar deal said borrowing could prove difficult amid projections of falling property tax revenue. The memo warned that the district "must make some very difficult decisions."

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NEWS ANALYSIS: Renewed Support for an Everglades Land Deal, but Cost Is Still in Question

03/20/2010
New York Times
Cave, Damien
MIAMI — Gov. Charlie Crist reaffirmed his commitment this week to the $536 million purchase of 73,000 acres of land from United States Sugar, declaring that it would heal both the Everglades and the coastal estuaries that are vital to Florida's tourist economy.

But with its original plan to borrow money for the deal being questioned by internal auditors, the state water district responsible for the acquisition has begun to explore alternatives that could require severe cuts to restoration projects already in motion — and the sale of a reservoir — or a renegotiated, smaller purchase.

"I buy into the deal and the vision because I think it's the right thing," said Eric Buermann, chairman of the advisory board at the South Florida Water Management District. "What I'm struggling with now is the financial part of it."

District officials are essentially assessing risk: how much can the agency stretch to pay for potential future benefits, without putting the present at risk?

The water district has a complicated mission. Formed in 1949, it represents the interests of 16 counties that support it with property taxes. In return, it accepts responsibility for "balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply."

Everglades restoration became an important component in 2000, when the district became the lead agency for the largest environmental restoration effort ever attempted. But with fickle weather and a complicated system of canals, pumps, lakes and artificial marshes, the district struggles with protecting its residents and nature.

There are a handful of worst-case events that it is trying to avoid.

In one, cutbacks to current water-quality projects as a result of the cost of the land acquisition would lead to a level of pollution in the Everglades that violates court-mandated agreements. Another would involve a flood, caused or aggravated by outdated equipment that could not be upgraded because of the deal.

The question is, what can be cut with the biggest financial gains and smallest risk?

Some decisions have already been made; construction on the 16,000-acre A-1 reservoir on the northeastern edge of the Everglades has been suspended. But more tough choices are expected. An internal budget document earlier this month listed 15 possible operating reductions, along with several potential land sales.

Mr. Buermann called the document "budgetary war games" that did not necessarily reflect what might actually happen. It is nonetheless an outline of the potential costs of the deal, to the Everglades and to the district's broader mission.

The biggest item is the L-8 reservoir, which the district estimates it would be able to sell for $250 million. Critics including Dexter Lehtinen, a lawyer for the Miccosukee Tribe — whose members live in the Everglades — maintain that if it were sold, water from the reservoir would go to support future residential development in Palm Beach County, rather than the wildlife refuge it was intended for.

There are also millions of dollars in cuts to projects intended to help the estuaries Governor Crist toured this week while promoting the deal. "It's the result of overpaying" for the United States Sugar property, Mr. Lehtinen said. "It's the result from putting conceptual metaphysical benefits ahead of real benefits."

Mr. Buermann, Governor Crist and environmentalists all denied that the price for the land is too high, though independent appraisers found it to be at least double the current market value. Karl Wickstrom, coordinator of the Rivers Coalition Defense Fund, said the effect of the potential cutbacks from the high price was "not much," compared with the potential benefits from projects on the land to be acquired.

But some of that land may end up on the chopping block, too. Three United States Sugar parcels that the budget document says are worth $127 million are listed as candidates for "sizing down." District officials have said that all of the land they were buying was vital for restoration, but in an interview on Friday, Mr. Buermann acknowledged that some parcels were better than others.

If the district had bargained for a lower price — United States Sugar entered negotiations at one of the most financially difficult times in its history — the district might have had an easier time paying for it all. Its list of potential cutbacks might be shorter, too. Instead, Mr. Buermann said, the district may have to narrow its ambitions.

"We do want the land," he said. "But whether we can or should at this point buy all of the 73,000 acres is probably going to be subject of negotiation."
Water managers exploring ways state can pay for U.S. Sugar land
03/19/2010
TCPalm.com
Morgan, Curtis

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
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.

Gov. Crist boats, shoots and dines his way through the Treasure Coast

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist did some boating on Thursday along the St. Lucie River, fired off a number of rounds with a Glock 9 mm semi-automatic pistol at Indian River State College's Public Safety Training Complex, and discussed economic growth in Indian River County.

He wrapped up his Treasure Coast visit at the Indian River County Republican Club's Lincoln Day Dinner, where he picked up an endorsement in his bid for the U.S. Senate from Indian River County resident John Walsh, host of "America's Most Wanted".

"Governor Crist has always been tough on crime, and he has the record to prove it. 'Chain Gang Charlie' and I have worked together to pass legislation to protect Florida's children and to enforce stricter penalties for criminals," Walsh said.

Otherwise, the U.S. Senate candidate trailing the race for the GOP nomination by 18 points — according to the left-leaning Daily Kos Research 2000 poll for March 15-17 — spent the day on governor office-related activities.

From Stuart, he took a pontoon boat tour of the St. Lucie River estuary, where he supported the South Florida Water Management District's governing board's recent deadline extension to negotiate the purchase of 73,000 acres of
farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. to help restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

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

The afternoon took him on a tour of IRSC, where he toured the year-old public safety training complex, watching SWAT teams practice entering rooms and testing the school's indoor firing range.

IRSC President Edwin Massey hoped Crist's visit would remind legislators that colleges are a smart investments.

"We have about 80,000 students (statewide) who have come into the system during these hard economic times," Massey said. "People are laid off and many of those jobs are never coming back."

Later he met with business and political leaders in Indian River County, thanking Piper Aircraft Inc. CEO Kevin Gould for keeping the business in Vero Beach, promoting his recommendations to kick-start job and economic growth on the Treasure Coast and in Florida, and defending his acceptance of federal stimulus dollars to fix holes in the state's budget.

"The idea of the stimulus is a bridge, to get us to a brighter economic future, which we will, we always do," Crist said.

GOV. CHARLIE CRIST ON THE TREASURE COAST

In Indian River County, Crist said the economy is improving, which should keep money in the state budget for teachers whose salaries are being paid now with federal stimulus money.

In Martin County, Crist talked about the importance of continuing negotiations to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. land for Everglades restoration to save the St. Lucie River estuary. Looking over the river's chocolate-brown water, he said, "I know in my heart that this is the right thing to do."

In St. Lucie County, Crist told Indian River State College President President Edwin Massey that it was important for colleges that the Florida House and Senate approve his proposed state budget.