



**SENATOR BURT L. SAUNDERS**  
37th District

## THE FLORIDA SENATE

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**COMMITTEES:**  
Environmental Preservation and  
Conservation, **CHAIR**  
Social Responsibility Policy and  
Calendar, **CHAIR**  
Commerce  
Education Facilities Appropriations  
Health and Human Services  
Appropriations  
Health Policy  
Judiciary  
Responsible Regulation  
Policy and Calendar  
Rules

**SELECT COMMITTEE:**  
**Property Insurance Accountability**

**JOINT COMMITTEE:**  
Everglades Oversight

June 24, 2008

Guest Opinion-Editorial: Bye-Bye Sugar

By: Senator Burt L. Saunders (R-Naples)

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Governor Crist and Carol Wehle, Executive Director of the South Florida Water Management District, recently announced that Florida and the U.S. Sugar Corporation had reached a deal whereby Florida would essentially purchase the assets of U.S. Sugar over a six year buy-out period for \$1.75 Billion. U.S. Sugar, at the end of the buy-out period, would cease all sugar farming operations, and Florida would take title to over 185,000 acres of sugar farms. The price is approximately \$9,000 per acre. The value of this acquisition to Florida and its environment is too great to calculate.

I once heard Governor Crist say that he would like to be remembered as the Everglades Governor, and this acquisition certainly earns him that title. This is an incredible acquisition for many reasons, and Governor Crist is to be commended for his leadership on this.

Florida and the Federal Government have entered into a thirty year 50/50 partnership to restore the Everglades National Park. The project, known as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project or CERP, has been fully underway for over ten years, with Florida investing \$2.5 Billion, to date. To date, our Federal partners have contributed only approximately \$360 Million or about 13% of the total project cost. This past legislative session, as Chairman of the Senate Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee, I had the honor of introducing legislation to renew Florida's commitment to this restoration project and to commit another \$2 Billion over the next ten years to the effort (\$1 Billion from the state and \$1 Billion from the South Florida Water Management District). A major component of the restoration effort has been the purchase of lands necessary to build filtration marshes and water retention facilities such as large reservoirs. Restoring the "River of Grass" requires tremendous amounts of land and water. The experts have long discussed the need to acquire the U.S. Sugar land interests for restoration to fully succeed. Until the Governor announced this land deal, few thought it would ever be financially feasible for the state to acquire these critical lands.

As the population of Florida grows, our citizens have rightfully demanded increased efforts to preserve the natural environmental systems that are so critical to our state's future. Florida's premier land purchasing program, Florida Forever, was just renewed for another ten years with bonding capacity expanded to enable the state to purchase another \$3 Billion worth of environmentally sensitive lands. The new Florida Forever program will place emphasis on less than fee simple acquisition (such as purchasing environmental easements) so that more land can be protected from development. By purchasing development rights and environmental easements, it is hoped that farmers can realize profits from the land while continuing to farm and ranch those lands. Farmers are the best land managers and keeping them in business while we protect their land from development is not only good for the environment but good for our agricultural economy.

These two programs will ensure we do all that we can to preserve our natural environment for future generations of Floridians. And, this opportunity to purchase 185,000 acres of sugar farms will long be remembered as a water-shed moment in Florida's preservation efforts. This land acquisition will provide not only land necessary for successful restoration, but will result in the cessation of a significant portion of the sugar farming activities that have long been the source of phosphorous and other nutrients polluting the Everglades. The net positive impact on the Everglades National Park cannot be overstated. This will result in sufficient water supplies for the environment, for farming and for projected population growth.

Future generations of Floridians will look back at our preservation efforts as representing a critical turning point in our thinking about nature and Florida's future. With these efforts, I am confident that the future of Florida and its fragile environmental systems is bright.

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