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Total Clips: 18

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
A Dance of Environment and Economics in the Everglades	07/31/2008	Tuscaloosa News, The	
Environmental groups want to enact development protections with U.S. Sugar deal	07/31/2008	South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online	Andy Reid
THE EVERGLADES State's reps in Congress want sugar-deal facts	07/31/2008	Miami Herald	Clark, Lesley
A dance of environment and economics in the Florida Everglades	07/31/2008	International Herald Tribune	
A Dance of Environment and Economics in the Everglades	07/31/2008	Gainesville Sun, The	
A Dance of Environment and Economics in the Everglades	07/31/2008	New York Times - Online	DAMIEN CAVE
Congressional delegation has questions about Everglades deal	07/30/2008	Palm Beach Post - Online	Lipman, Larry
Environmental groups Halt changes in Glades while U. S. Sugar details still murky	07/30/2008	Palm Beach Post - Online	PAUL QUINLAN
Environmental groups want development moratorium for Everglades area	07/30/2008	Jupiter Courier	By Andy Reid, Sun-Sentinel
Florida Delegation Decries Secrecy Of U.S. Sugar Deal	07/31/2008	TBO.com	

	State's reps in Congress want sugar-deal facts	07/31/2008	Miami Herald - Online	Clark, Lesley
	U.S. Sugar deal's secrecy peeves state's congressional delegation	07/30/2008	St. Petersburg Times - Online	
	Over 400 people attend July 21 meeting	07/31/2008	Glades County Democrat	Bolan, Nena
	Deal with U.S. Sugar catches Florida's U.S. Congress membership by surprise	07/31/2008	News-Press	Eun Kyung Kim
	Florida's House District 78 race pits three Democrats against each other	07/30/2008	South Florida Sun-Sentinel - West Palm Beach Bureau	Hollis, Mark
	Lawmakers out of loop in \$1.75 billion plan to buy U. S. Sugar	07/31/2008	News-Press	EUN KYUNG KIM
	Study: Sugar buyout to cost \$1.6 billion revenue, 10,700 jobs	07/31/2008	Naples Daily News	Layden, Laura
	Mapping the Everglades' Varied Landscapes	07/31/2008	Miller-McCune	Badger, Emily

A Dance of Environment and Economics in the Everglades

07/31/2008

Tuscaloosa News, The

[Return to Top](#)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. When Florida officials announced a plan last month to save the Everglades by buying United States Sugar and its 187,000 acres, they knew that the success of their plan could be defined by Alfonso Fanjul and his brother J. Pepe Fanjul.

The New York Times

The Fanjuls family-run sugar company, Florida Crystals, owns what the state wants: about 35,000 acres needed to recreate the River of Grass historic water flow from Lake Okeechobee south to the Everglades.

State officials have said they hope to trade some of United States Sugars assets for the Fanjuls property, and in their first interview since the deal was announced, the Fanjuls said they were on board but with a few caveats.

Their mill and biomass power plant in Okeelanta, which is in the path of the flow way in some draft plans, cannot be moved, they said. And wouldnt it be best, they hinted, to let Florida Crystals use much of the states new land for sugar, to preserve jobs and produce fuel for their clean-energy projects?

We really want to be as green as we possibly can be, said Alfonso Fanjul, the companys chief executive. But, J. Pepe Fanjul added, You have to have a balance between the environment and economic development. Something has to be done for the humans, too.

Some advocates for the Everglades question the Fanjuls motives, in part because of their well-publicized donations to both political parties and their efforts to protect a federal price-support program for sugar.

But other environmentalists said the family had often been unfairly singled out. They point out that United States Sugar, not Florida Crystals, has historically been the states largest sugar producer and the worst steward of the land, according to lawsuits filed against the industry.

Since the 1990s, Florida Crystals has also invested heavily in cleaner farming methods and alternative energy. The result is a steady decline in pollutants that Florida Crystals and other local farmers dump in waterways, according to state figures, though phosphorous levels are still above the 10 parts per billion that the Everglades fragile ecosystem requires.

The Fanjuls company also now runs North Americas largest biomass power plant, producing up to 140 megawatts of electricity. And last year, the University of Florida chose Florida Crystals for a \$20 million pilot project to turn cellulose into liquid ethanol.

Ben Legendre, director of the Sugar Institute at Louisiana State University, said, Florida Crystals is a leader in the industry with new technology.

David Guest, a lawyer for Earthjustice who has tangled frequently with the sugar industry in court, agreed. The environmental community tends to see sugar as one unitary thing, and it isnt really, Mr. Guest said.

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Since the United States Sugar deal was announced June 24 with a November deadline for closing, the Fanjuls have expanded efforts to show that their environmental and economic efforts are aligned.

Company executives have met at least twice with state officials since June. A few weeks ago, the Fanjuls also hired John Wark, a public relations consultant whose clients have included the Everglades Foundation and the Environmental Defense Fund. At Mr. Warks suggestion, reporters from several news organizations have recently been invited to visit the companys facilities at Okeelanta.

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Yet there are also signs here that Florida Crystals remains a company in transition, unsure of how green to go. At the distribution center, organic sugar is prominently displayed though Mr. Cantens acknowledged that it was produced on only 5,000 of the companys 155,000 acres in Palm Beach County. (Were expanding it, he said.)

Some environmentalists are skeptical. The company has always operated on the principle that its bottom line is most important, said Alan Farago, executive director of the Everglades Defense Council.

Indeed, Alfonso Fanjul cited the business-minded book Green to Gold, by Daniel C. Esty and Andrew S. Winston, as an inspiration, not Marjory Stoneman Douglass The Everglades: Rivers of Grass. And in a days worth of tours and briefings, it became clear that the Fanjuls were at least as interested in getting additional land for profits and jobs as for clean energy.

In emphasizing the economy, they have allies. The most vocal critics of the states plan have been United States Sugar workers like K. S. Jones, one of about 1,900 employees who will be unemployed if the state puts United States Sugar out of business

in six years, as the current plan proposes.

Last week, in a meeting at United States Sugars headquarters in Clewiston, Mr. Jones spoke first. He told state officials that if a similar agro-economy does not replace United States Sugar, the area will be filled with ghost towns. Any dollar lost hurts a small, rural county, he said.

One fresh idea, discussed in Clewiston and supported by Florida Crystals, is an inland intermodal center that would hold containers for the areas ports. It could add 32,000 jobs by 2015, according to a state-sponsored study.

But for now, one question looms: How much land should go to the Everglades? Thomas Van Lent, a senior scientist at the Everglades Foundation, has estimated that about 130,000 acres would be needed to supply the Everglades and water treatment areas. If that is accurate, and if all of the unused acquisition went to the Fanjuls in a trade or sale, Florida Crystals could add 57,000 acres to the 155,000 it already owns in Florida.

Mindful of the continuing negotiations, the South Florida Water Management District has repeatedly declined to offer figures of its own. State officials have also not said whether they would seek to shut down Okeelanta in a land swap.

We cannot respond to conjecture or assumptions at this point about a potential acquisition still under negotiation, Carole Wehle, the districts executive director, said in an e-mail message.

Mr. Van Lent said the state was probably still studying the financial picture.

This opportunity came out of the blue, he said, and I dont think anyone has gone through and crunched the numbers on what the lowest cost is, whether its trading land with the Fanjuls or building on the current U.S. Sugar footprint.

On Tuesday, a federal judge ruled that Florida and the federal Environmental Protection Agency had failed to enforce the Clean Water Act by extending Everglades clean-up deadlines to 2016 from 2006 through a law the sugar industry had lobbied for.

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Our biggest concern, he added, is that they do things properly, in an orderly way.

Environmental groups want to enact development protections with U.S. Sugar deal

07/31/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

[Return to Top](#)

In the midst of the state's buyout negotiations with U.S. Sugar, a coalition of environmental groups on Wednesday called for a moratorium on development that could create new obstacles to Everglades restoration.

The state by November hopes to finalize a \$1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area and re-create the flow of water that once linked Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

In the meantime, a group of more than 40 local and national environmental organizations has called for cities, counties and the state to put the brakes on any development proposals, land deals or other projects that could get in the way of Everglades restoration after the U.S. Sugar deal is done. 'Actually study the area ... have a grand master plan,' said David Reiner, president of Friends of the Everglades. 'There is no end game yet.' The recommendations issued Wednesday by the Everglades Coalition and the Everglades Foundation include: " A moratorium on approving new development, mining or 'other changes in use' in the Everglades Agricultural Area until restoration plans are revamped; " Holding off on any approvals for an 'inland port' near Belle Glade that would use trains and trucks to transport freight across the state from ships at the Port of Palm Beach; " Designating the agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee an 'Area of Critical State Concern,' which brings development rules and protections similar to those in place in the Florida Keys.

Those standards could hurt 's plans for a new western landfill. They would also at least delay the proposed inland port distribution center and other economic development ideas suggested as ways for Glades communities to compensate for losing U.S. Sugar jobs. 'This is basically asking for a decade delay,' Administrator Bob Weisman said.

The U.S. Sugar deal aims to restore a huge swath of the Everglades Agricultural Area, 700,000 acres of former Everglades land drained to make way for farming. The state proposes buying out U.S. Sugar and potentially swapping land with other cane growers to re-create the lost link that once allowed water to flow from the lake to the Everglades.

Environmental groups want to ensure that those land swaps don't allow new polluters and restoration impediments to move into the agricultural area.

Agriculture can still have a place in the Glades after the U.S. Sugar deal and the area should not be thrown open to development to compensate for lost jobs, Audubon of Florida

lobbyist Eric Draper said. 'We don't think that the Glades communities should be shut down,' Draper said. 'But we don't want to see ad hoc development take place.' Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@sun-sentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

THE EVERGLADES State's reps in Congress want sugar-deal facts

07/31/2008

Miami Herald

Clark, Lesley

[Return to
Top](#)

Florida's congressional delegation prodded state officials Wednesday to divulge more details on the top-secret negotiations to buy out U.S. Sugar, saying they were left out of the loop.

While enthusiastic about the deal, several members of Congress said they're worried about the economic effects of losing a major employer in a rural area that is already struggling.

And they said state officials have been stingy with information about the \$1.75 billion deal to purchase hundreds of thousands of acres of land long coveted by environmentalists.

DELEGATION HEAD

"If you want me in on the landing, you ought to have me in on the takeoff," said Rep. Alcee Hastings, a Miramar Democrat who chairs Florida's congressional delegation, along with Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Miami Republican.

The pair convened their peers for a two-hour grilling of state officials, who pledged full disclosure as the complex deal comes together. The South Florida Water Management District agreed on June 30 to negotiate the purchase agreement with U.S. Sugar for 75 days, with a target date for closing the deal by Nov. 30.

"This will very much be done in the sunshine," Carol Wehle, executive director of the district, assured lawmakers. She said the deal, which involves both buying land and potentially swapping tracts with other growers, won't require any federal or state dollars. The water management agency is expected to pick up the tab through property taxes.

But legislators said they're worried that the loss of the sugar giant could cripple the area south of Lake Okeechobee, which has depended on the company.

"These areas have suffered [even] with a successful business," said Rep. Ron Klein, a Boca Raton Democrat.

Bartow Republican Rep. Adam Putnam suggested the area already took a hit when state officials announced they wanted to buy out U.S. Sugar.

RURAL AREAS

"You're already behind trying to figure out how to deal with the effect on people's lives," Putnam said, asking state officials how much experience they had in working in rural areas.

Dale Brill, the director of the state's Office of Tourism said the state is prepared to help redevelop the local economy and plans training for new jobs, along with potentially expanding nature-based tourism in the area.

Rep. Allen Boyd, a Monticello Democrat, said he is concerned the state is paying too much for the land, which state officials said would help resolve water storage, availability and pollution concerns that have plagued the \$10.8 billion state-federal Everglades restoration effort.

Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said water management staff is now running appraisals and environmental assessments on the property.

"These are the same questions that ... we ourselves are seeking answers to," Sole said of the congressional inquiries. "We're still seeking answers to those questions and we're looking forward to providing answers to the delegation."

`WORKED OUT'

Hastings said he's afraid the scope of the project could set back federal efforts to fund Everglades restoration by creating a perception that it "looks like y'all have the Everglades problem worked out."

Wehle noted that the purchase addresses water storage problems, but that "most of the other projects remain. That does not change."

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A dance of environment and economics in the Florida Everglades

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International Herald Tribune

[Return to](#)
[Top](#)

); E-Mail Article Listen to Article Printer-Friendly 3-Column Format Translate Share Article Text Size WEST PALM BEACH, Florida: When Florida officials announced a plan last month to save the Everglades by buying United States Sugar and its 187,000 acres, they knew that the success of their plan could be defined by Alfonso Fanjul and his brother J. Pepe Fanjul. The Fanjuls' family-run sugar company, Florida Crystals, owns what the state wants: about 35,000 acres needed to recreate the River of Grass's historic water flow from Lake Okeechobee south to the Everglades.

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Their mill and biomass power plant in Okeelanta, which is in the path of the flow way in some draft plans, cannot be moved, they said. And wouldn't it be best, they hinted, to let Florida Crystals use much of the state's new land for sugar, to preserve jobs and produce fuel for their clean-energy projects? 'We really want to be as green as we possibly can be,' said Alfonso Fanjul, the company's chief executive. But, Pepe Fanjul added, 'You have to have a balance between the environment and economic development. Something has to be done for the humans, too.' Today in Americas Obama blames reckless Republican policies for economic plight Brazil grows as larger economies struggle At a fork in the road, Cuba follows two paths Some advocates for the Everglades question the Fanjuls' motives, in part because of their well-publicized donations to both political parties and their efforts to protect a U.S. government price-support program for sugar.

But other environmentalists said the family had often been unfairly singled out. They point out that United States Sugar, not Florida Crystals, has historically been the state's largest sugar producer and the worst steward of the land, according to lawsuits filed against the industry.

Since the 1990s, Florida Crystals has also invested heavily in cleaner farming methods and alternative energy. The result is a steady decline in pollutants that Florida Crystals and other local farmers dump in waterways, according to state figures, though phosphorous levels are still above the 10 parts per billion that the Everglades' fragile ecosystem requires. The Fanjuls' company also now runs North America's largest biomass power plant, producing up to 140 megawatts of electricity. And last year, the University of Florida chose Florida Crystals for a \$20 million pilot project to turn cellulose into liquid ethanol.

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A Dance of Environment and Economics in the Everglades

07/31/2008

Gainesville Sun, The

[Return to
Top](#)

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07/31/2008

New York Times - Online

DAMIEN CAVE

[Return to
Top](#)

Damien Cave-New York Times

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Mindful of the continuing negotiations, the South Florida Water Management District has repeatedly declined to offer figures of its own. State officials have also not said whether they would seek to

shut down Okeelanta in a land swap. We cannot respond to conjecture or assumptions at this point about a potential acquisition still under negotiation, Carole Wehle, the districts executive director, said in an e-mail message.

Mr. Van Lent said the state was probably still studying the financial picture. This opportunity came out of the blue, he said, and I don't think anyone has gone through and crunched the numbers on what the lowest cost is, whether its trading land with the Fanjuls or building on the current U.S. Sugar footprint. On Tuesday, a federal judge ruled that Florida and the federal had failed to enforce the Clean Water Act by extending Everglades clean-up deadlines to 2016 from 2006 through a law the sugar industry had lobbied for.

But whenever the state figures out what it wants, the Fanjuls said they would be ready to dig into the details and try to help. We want to be an active participant playing a role in how it should be done, said Alfonso Fanjul. Our biggest concern, he added, is that they do things properly, in an orderly way.

Congressional delegation has questions about Everglades deal

07/30/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

Lipman, Larry

[Return to
Top](#)

Larry Lipman-Palm Beach Post

WASHINGTON Members of Florida's congressional delegation told state officials Wednesday they were concerned how the proposed \$1.75 billion state purchase of U.S. Sugar property south of Lake Okeechobee would impact local communities and federal support for Everglades restoration.

Lawmakers mixed praise for the proposed deal's concept with sharp questions about how it would be financed and why neither they nor community officials were informed about it before the announcement last month. 'If you want me in on the landing, you ought to have me in on the take-off,' quipped U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar.

Lawmakers from both parties said they were concerned about the sale's impact on local communities.

U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Bartow, said the state should move quickly to provide support to residents whose 'home values collapsed' when it was announced that U.S. Sugar would be going out of business.

U.S. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton, said the state should consider setting up an endowment fund to support affected communities over many years because of the economic impact the deal will have on them.

Klein noted that even when the communities were supported by a

thriving business, their economic conditions, health care coverage and education were behind much of the state.

Dale Brill, director of the state's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, acknowledged that his department has not done an adequate job of informing local communities about the project's impact. U.S. Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, said local residents have been calling his office because they cannot get answers from the state.

Brill said the state planned to publish information inserts in local newspapers later this month, but Hastings and Mahoney urged him to also convene town hall meetings at which high-ranking state officials could explain the program.

Several lawmakers said they were concerned that members of Congress would view the land purchase as an indication that the state does not need continued federal support for the Everglades restoration project and questioned whether it would cause delays in the restoration effort.

Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, said the project would cause a two or three year delay in some restoration projects - including the C-44 project which runs from Lake Okeechobee at Port Mayaca to the south fork of the St. Lucie River - but most of the Everglades restoration project would remain on schedule. She said the land purchase project would not require federal money.

The land purchase project would eliminate the need for a controversial series of underground water storage wells, Wehle said, because it would allow construction of a 1 million acre-feet reservoir - about 326 trillion gallons - that would regulate the flow of water further south into the Everglades.

Michael W. Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, told the delegation that the proposed sale 'is not a done deal,' but represented an 'historic opportunity for the state of Florida.' Under the proposal, U.S. Sugar would continue its farming operations for another six years before the property would be acquired by the water management district. Land and other properties - such as a sugar mill and citrus plant - that are not necessary for environmental protection and restoration would be leased for continued agricultural use, state officials said.

Sole and Wehle said there has been a misunderstanding about how the project would affect the flow of water from the lake to the Everglades. Although the popular impression is that the water would flow steady over the ground from the lake southward - the way it did 150 years ago - the officials said that was no longer physically possible because the ground has settled. And they said the lake water needs to be cleaned to remove high levels of phosphorus before it reaches the Everglades.

Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation, applauded the proposed project and said it would have a significant impact not only on the environment, but on the South Florida economy. 'If we don't fix the water problem, jobs will be affected not only in Clewiston but throughout the whole state,' Fordham said, pointing to recent events such as wildfires and water shortages that have affected most of the state.

Environmental groups Halt changes in Glades while U.S. Sugar details still murky

07/30/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

[Return to
Top](#)

Paul Quinlan-Palm Beach Post

Palm Beach County and other local governments should refrain from approving any land-use changes, zoning decisions or similar actions in the Glades until the state decides how to use the 187,000 acres it's buying from U.S. Sugar Corp. to restore the Everglades, 50 environmental groups said in a joint statement today.

The Everglades Foundation and the 49-group Everglades Coalition are making their recommendations more than a month after Gov. Charlie Crist and the South Florida Water Management District announced the \$1.7 billion purchase. To date, the water managers have yet to offer details on how they plan to use the land they're acquiring. The groups also called for guaranteeing a reliable water supply and eliminating barriers to the historic flow of fresh water south from the Kissimmee Basin into Lake Okeechobee and down to Florida Bay.

Specifically, they said the state should devote more than 45,000 acres to expanding its already sprawling network of Everglades filter marshes in western Palm Beach and eastern Hendry counties. And they said land swaps of up to 30,000 acres should be considered for areas north of Lake Okeechobee to improve the quality of water flowing into the lake and south through the ecosystem. 'We believe it is critical to ensure an adequate supply of clean water to the Everglades,' said Lisa Interlandi, senior counsel to the Everglades Law Center. 'Equally important, though, is preventing development that could harm the restoration efforts and ensuring that economic development initiatives are compatible with restoration.' Among other actions, the coalition called for halting plans for an 'inland port,' a proposed a rail, trucking and industrial storage hub that has gained steam as a potential solution to the Glades region's expected economic loss from the U.S. Sugar purchase.

Various sites around Lake Okeechobee have been proposed, although planners have indicated that they favor a location on sugar land in the heart of the Everglades Agricultural Area, immediately south of Lake Okeechobee.

The moratorium should also extend to any proposals for new rock mines, roads, rail lines, power plants and other projects, the environmental groups urged. The Everglades groups expressed frustration earlier this year when county commissioners approved a sharp expansion of rock mining in the sugar region, months before the announcement of the \$1.7 billion deal.

Environmental groups want development moratorium for Everglades area

07/30/2008

Jupiter Courier

By Andy Reid, Sun-Sentinel

[Return to Top](#)

By Andy Reid, Sun-Sentinel

In the midst of the state's buyout negotiations with U.S. Sugar, a coalition of environmental groups on Wednesday called for a moratorium on development that could create new obstacles to Everglades restoration.

The state by November hopes to finalize a \$1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres in the Everglades Agricultural Area and recreate the flow of water that once linked Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

In the meantime, a group of more than 40 local and national environmental groups has called for cities, counties and the state to put the brakes on any development proposals, land deals or other projects that could get in the way of Everglades restoration after the U.S. Sugar deal is done. 'Actually study the area ... have a grand master plan,' said David Reiner, president of Friends of the Everglades. 'There is no end game yet.' The recommendations issued Wednesday by the Everglades Coalition and the Everglades Foundation include:

*A moratorium on approving new development, mining or 'other changes in use' in the Everglades Agricultural Area until restoration plans are revamped;

*Hold off on any approvals for an 'inland port' near Belle Glade that would use trains and trucks to transport freight across the state from ships at the Port of Palm Beach;

*Designate the agricultural land south of Lake Okeechobee an 'Area of Critical State Concern,' which brings development rules and protections similar to those in place in the Florida Keys.

Those standards could hurt Palm Beach County's plans for a new western landfill. They would also at least delay the proposed inland port distribution center and other economic development ideas suggested as ways for Glades communities to compensate for losing U.S. Sugar jobs. 'This is basically asking for a decade delay,' Palm Beach County Administrator Bob Weisman said.

The U.S. Sugar deal aims to restore a huge swath of the Everglades Agricultural Area, 700,000 acres of former Everglades land drained to make way for farming. The state proposes buying out U.S. Sugar and potentially swapping land with other cane growers to recreate the lost link that once allowed water to flow from the lake to the Everglades.

Environmental groups want to ensure that those land swaps don't allow new polluters and restoration impediments to move into the agricultural area.

Agriculture can still have a place in the Glades after the U.S. Sugar deal and the area should not be thrown open to development to compensate for lost jobs, Audubon of Florida lobbyist Eric Draper said.

Florida Delegation Decries Secrecy Of U.S. Sugar Deal

07/31/2008

TBO.com

[Return to Top](#)

By BILLY HOUSE-The Tampa Tribune

Published: July 31, 2008 WASHINGTON - Some of Florida's U.S. House members complained Wednesday about being kept in the dark during the state's secret negotiations of a \$1.75 billion proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp.

Several, including Rep. Adam Putnam of Bartow, the nation's third-ranking House Republican, also told state officials at a meeting that they have concerns about Gov. Charlie Crist's proposal, marketed as a way to save the Florida Everglades.

"It's clear that this deal is now facing the consequences of the secrecy with which it was negotiated and the lack of impacted parties being part of the negotiation," Putnam said after the meeting.

A closing on a negotiated contract between the South Florida Water Management District and U.S. Sugar is set for November.

Among the issues raised by the lawmakers Wednesday of the plan to restore water flow from the Northern Everglades to the River of Grass: Is the price the state would pay Clewiston-based U.S. Sugar for its 187,000 acres and other holdings in the northern Everglades too high? One lawmaker, Democrat Allen Boyd of Monticello suggested it might be. Can this amount really be paid for without raising taxes? How much of that will rely on suspending other projects? What other projects might have to be halted or scaled back because of incompatibility with the plans to create a network of reservoirs and water-treatment marshes connecting Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades? In the six years that U.S. Sugar will be given to wind down its operations before closing shop, what will the impact be on Clewiston and nearby communities? How about job losses and other local effects, such as on farming? Why wasn't the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the state's 50 percent federal partner in Everglades restoration work, not brought into the negotiations with U.S. Sugar?

Despite the questions, there was no indication that House members were set on trying to scuttle the deal.

A federal hammer could possibly be wielded by blocking needed

funding, or tying any future funding to more specific requirements. However, House members Wednesday seemed more angered at federal officials being left out of the loop.

"If you want me on the landing, then you ought to have me on the take-off," said Rep. Alcee Hastings of Miramar, a Democrat who is the dean of the Florida House delegation.

Added Putnam: "The bottom line is, all of the assumptions, modeling and engineering that the federal-state (Everglades restoration) partnership is based on are substantially out the window, because it wasn't based on this event occurring, this purchase. So, you've got to hit the pause button."

In addition, Putnam said there has been inadequate attention paid to the immediate effect on the surrounding communities, and that some home values there are plummeting.

"Why would someone want to move to these communities with this kind of uncertainty hanging out there?" he asked. "So, while the engineers and hydrologists may have over a decade to figure this deal out, the people who make their homes south of the lake are suffering today," he said.

Michael Sole, secretary of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, at one point during the meeting said, "this is not a done deal," but also called it a "fantastic opportunity" for the state.

He later said "the questions the Congressional delegation raised are good questions. It is my expectation the state will address those concerns as we move forward."

Reporter Billy House can be reached at (202) 662-7673 or bhouse@tampatrib.com.

State's reps in Congress want sugar-deal facts

07/31/2008

Miami Herald - Online

Clark, Lesley

[Return to](#)
[Top](#)

Lesley Clark-Miami Herald
WASHINGTON --

While enthusiastic about the deal, several members of Congress said they're worried about the economic effects of losing a major employer in a rural area that is already struggling.

And they said state officials have been stingy with information about the \$1.75 billion deal to purchase hundreds of thousands of acres of land long coveted by environmentalists.

DELEGATION HEAD

"If you want me in on the landing, you ought to have me in on the takeoff," said Rep. Alcee Hastings, a Miramar Democrat who chairs Florida's congressional delegation, along with Rep. Lincoln Diaz-Balart, a Miami Republican.

The pair convened their peers for a two-hour grilling of state officials, who pledged full disclosure as the complex deal comes together. The South Florida Water Management District agreed on June 30 to negotiate the purchase agreement with U.S. Sugar for 75 days, with a target date for closing the deal by Nov. 30.

"This will very much be done in the sunshine," Carol Wehle, executive director of the district, assured lawmakers. She said the deal, which involves both buying land and potentially swapping tracts with other growers, won't require any federal or state dollars. The water management agency is expected to pick up the tab through property taxes.

But legislators said they're worried that the loss of the sugar giant could cripple the area south of Lake Okeechobee, which has depended on the company.

"These areas have suffered [even] with a successful business," said Rep. Ron Klein, a Boca Raton Democrat.

Bartow Republican Rep. Adam Putnam suggested the area already took a hit when state officials announced they wanted to buy out U.S. Sugar.

RURAL AREAS

"You're already behind trying to figure out how to deal with the effect on people's lives," Putnam said, asking state officials how much experience they had in working in rural areas.

Dale Brill, the director of the state's Office of Tourism said the state is prepared to help redevelop the local economy and plans training for new jobs, along with potentially expanding nature-based tourism in the area.

Rep. Allen Boyd, a Monticello Democrat, said he is concerned the state is paying too much for the land, which state officials said would help resolve water storage, availability and pollution concerns that have plagued the \$10.8 billion state-federal Everglades restoration effort.

Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, said water management staff is now running appraisals and environmental assessments on the

property.

"These are the same questions that ... we ourselves are seeking answers to," Sole said of the congressional inquiries. "We're still seeking answers to those questions and we're looking forward to providing answers to the delegation." 'WORKED OUT' Hastings said he's afraid the scope of the project could set back federal efforts to fund Everglades restoration by creating a perception that it "looks like y'all have the Everglades problem worked out."

Wehle noted that the purchase addresses water storage problems, but that "most of the other projects remain. That does not change."

U.S. Sugar deal's secrecy peeves state's congressional delegation

07/30/2008

St. Petersburg Times - Online

[Return to Top](#)

By Wes Allison, St Petersburg Times

WASHINGTON — Gov. Charlie Crist's top emissaries arrived at the Capitol on Wednesday to brief Florida's congressional delegation on his massive buyout of U.S. Sugar's operations in the Everglades.

They ended up stepping into an alligator's nest.

Despite Crist's stated goal of buying nearly 200,000 acres from U. S. Sugar to speed up the rehabilitation of the Everglades, a goal the Florida delegation overwhelmingly supports, Republicans and Democrats alike were clearly peeved at having been kept in the dark until the deal was announced — especially given the federal government's key role in the \$20-billion Everglades restoration project.

During a testy, two-hour exchange, several lawmakers accused the state of failing to adequately consider how the deal might affect the communities, many of them poor, around Lake Okeechobee. Others questioned the \$1.75-billion price tag.

"You could have bought out every stockholder 1½ to two times for this amount of money," U.S. Rep. Allen Boyd, a North Florida Democrat, scolded.

Several also said they worried that secrecy surrounding the deal and the lack of federal input, especially from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, could jeopardize future federal funding by creating the perception that Florida can handle it alone.

Congress recently appropriated \$2-billion to the corps for planning and engineering of key first-stage Everglades projects, but billions more will be needed.

Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Palm Beach County, said one congressional appropriator recently told him, "It looks like y'all

have your Everglades problems worked out."

Michael Sole, Florida's secretary of environmental protection, and Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, told lawmakers some of the land will be used to build a huge reservoir south of Lake Okeechobee.

The reservoir, which would take 15 years to build, would help regulate flows into the Everglades during periods of drought and flood, and may also be used for drinking water.

Members acknowledged a reservoir may save money and aid the environment by reducing the need for a plan to drill into the aquifer and use it for drinking water storage.

But Adam Putnam, R-Bartow, said the aquifer storage plan, which is under way, will have to be completely re-engineered. "It's clear the deal is now facing the consequences of the secrecy in which it was negotiated," Putnam said.

Sole promised to keep the members updated in the future.

Meanwhile, Dale Brill, director of the state Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, assured the delegation that he already is trying to determine how best to use the property, existing railroad and other assets not needed for Everglades restoration. He said he plans to work with residents in the affected communities on job training, housing and other issues.

Several members were less than satisfied. "Impact on the communities is not six years from now," Putnam said. "It was the morning this was announced, the morning that housing values collapsed and people began restricting their spending, because they don't know what their income is going to be."

Over 400 people attend July 21 meeting

07/31/2008

Glades County Democrat
Bolan, Nena

[Return to
Top](#)

John Boy Auditorium filled with residents and officials

By Nena Bolan - Glades County Democrat

GLADES/HENDRY – More than 400 concerned residents and officials from communities around Lake Okeechobee and the central Heartland region met at John Boy Auditorium in Clewiston, July 21.

Previously, on June 24 it was announced by Governor Charlie Crist and South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) that the state would buy out United States Sugar Corporation (USSC) and its mill, refinery, railroad, 187,000 acres and other holdings. In six years, the largest agriculture business in the Glades region will close down for good. The fine-tuned details of the transaction will be finalized by Nov. 30. That is a short period of time for a long term plan. The main focus of comments was the drastic impact facing not only 1,700 employees and their families, but the scores of ancillary businesses that directly and indirectly survive as suppliers and sub-contractors for the sugar industry. County, city and state agency jobs and projects from around the region may be influenced by the \$1.75 billion deal.

Chris Doolin, Small County Coalition, mentioned that coastal communities will benefit the most; and the counties that can least afford the brunt of economic loss are the ones making sacrifices. The Small County Coalition mission is to provide visibility and support to small counties and rural communities. Mr. Doolin also commented on the tight-lipped negotiations that occurred between USSC and the state.

"Many of the highest office holders in the state did not know," said Mr. Doolin.

Pahokee Mayor, Wayne Whitaker, lamented the plight of 16 counties in the agriculture dependent district that will be paying for it.

"I don't think that is fair," Mr. Whitaker said.

The small town of Pahokee, on the east bank of Lake Okeechobee, saw the closing of the local Bryant sugar mill in 2007.

Clewiston Mayor, Mali Chamness, mentioned the area will be held captive for six years, and that tourism alone is not enough to sustain the economy.

"We need definite plans now," said Ms Chamness.

The small town of Clewiston, on the south bank of Lake Okeechobee, has already seen many employees laid off within USSC in the last several years.

Glades County Commissioner, Butch Jones, is also a railroad engineer for USSC and chairman for Florida Heartland Rural Economic Development Initiative, Inc. (FHREDI). The county he represents borders the western bank of Lake Okeechobee, and has been facing economic hardship for decades.

"Communities around the lake are family," Mr. Jones said.

The sugar industry has sustained families in the Northern Everglades for more than 80 years. At the end of the meeting, not one official nor state agency representative was able to offer current plans for sustaining the health and welfare of rural families.

For more information to to <http://www.smallcountycoalition.com>, <https://flaheartland.com>, and <http://protectflowwayfamilies.org>. Staff writer Nena Bolan can be reached at nenabolan@yahoo.com.

Deal with U.S. Sugar catches Florida's U.S. Congress membership by surprise

07/31/2008

News-Press

Eun Kyung Kim

[Return to
Top](#)

EUN KYUNG KIM • Gannett News Service-News-Press

WASHINGTON — Florida's congressional delegation said it was caught off guard by last month's announcement between the state and the U.S. Sugar Corp.

"When I read in the paper that this deal went down, I was shocked," said Rep. Allen Boyd, the Monticello Democrat who represents the Tallahassee region.

During a delegation meeting held Wednesday at the Capitol, lawmakers spent nearly two hours quizzing Florida officials about details of the \$1.75 billion proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp., which in turn will hand over 187,000 acres to the state for Everglades restoration.

Michael Sole, secretary of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection, called the agreement "a historic opportunity for the state." But he acknowledged to lawmakers that "it's not a done deal. We have a lot of work to do."

Florida's House District 78 race pits three Democrats against each other

07/30/2008

South Florida Sun-Sentinel - West Palm Beach

Bureau

Hollis, Mark

[Return to
Top](#)

By Mark Hollis | South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Three Democrats — a chiropractor, an insurance agent and a former newspaper writer — are battling for a state House seat in which none of the candidates has deep roots within the district's boundaries.

House District 78 encompasses southwestern Palm Beach County and stretches to parts of Martin, St. Lucie and Okeechobee counties, with much of the district dominated by farms, suburban homes and a heavily Jewish population.

The race has emerged as one of Florida's must-watch fights, with donations flooding in from outside the district and the candidates' tones becoming increasingly nasty.

Kevin Greenstein Rader, an independent insurance agent who has failed in bids for the School Board and a legislative seat, is leading the trio in donations, having raised more than \$112,000.

Chiropractor Steve Perman, a candidate for the District 78 seat two years ago, is running again and has been airing television ads touting himself as a health-care advocate with experience in Tallahassee having lobbied for chiropractors. He's raised more than \$86,000.

A third contender is Steve Nichol, the treasurer of the Palm Beach County Democratic Party, a public relations specialist and former South Florida Sun-Sentinel reporter who is funding his race substantially with personal loans. With \$25,000 in donations and \$55,000 in personal loans, he has dropped at least \$82,000 into his war chest.

Rader, Perman and Nichol are running in the Aug. 26 Democratic primary. Since no Republican is seeking the post, all voters, regardless of party affiliation, will be eligible to vote. The seat is now held by Rep. Richard Macheck, a term-limited Delray Beach Democrat.

All three candidates are campaigning along common Democratic Party themes of eliminating tax breaks for some special interests, expanding state-backed health care coverage and increasing subsidies for environmentally friendly fuel supplies. All have expressed cautious support of the \$1.75 billion deal to sell U.S. Sugar property to the South Florida Water Management District.

Rader promotes himself as an executive of a 180-employee insurance agency (Advanced Insurance Underwriters) and an expert on insurance law. He is the only candidate who owns a home in the district. He wants to reform the way the state-backed Citizens Insurance Corp. is financed. And in his campaign speeches, he frequently mentions his Jewish background and that his wife is a rabbi.

"I'm the only candidate who really lives in the district," Rader says. "I think it's a point to be made. But I also think that people should know that I'll be an expert on the state economy, and I'm a successful businessman, and compared to my two opponents, I bring the most experience in actually helping people with saving money."

Rader has lived in District 78 for only about a year. Previously, he lived east of the district in Boca Raton, and his office is not headquartered within the district.

Nichol lives about a mile outside the district but plans to move if elected and insists that given the district's jagged boundaries, the residency issue is "not relevant" and that he has experience understanding the district and its needs.

Nichol said that if elected, he would focus on economic issues, such as ways to make Florida's ports more viable, and on education topics. He derides his opponents as potential skills for the medical and insurance industries, and says that he aims to improve the public's perception of elected officials.

"I've held positions of trust throughout my entire life. I've shown the ability to be a leader, including as a twice-elected treasurer of the Democratic Party in Palm Beach County," Nichol said. "There's something to be said about getting it done at the party level."

Perman disputes Rader's assertion that he lives outside the district. He says he's been registered to vote at an address west of Boynton Beach in District 78 since December, though he still homesteads in Broward County, outside the district. Perman's chiropractic business has operated in District 78 for more than a decade.

If elected, Perman said he hopes to focus on lowering medical costs for the public by passing what's known as "any willing provider" legislation. Such a plan, he says, would make it easier for health maintenance organization subscribers to get health treatments that might not be covered by insurers.

"I want to be a voice of reason for people getting decent access to health care," he said.

Mark Hollis can be reached at mhollis@sun-sentinel.com or 561-228-5512.

Lawmakers out of loop in \$1.75 billion plan to buy U.S. Sugar

07/31/2008

News-Press

EUN KYUNG KIM

[Return to](#)
[Top](#)

By EUN KYUNG KIM • Gannett News Service • News-Press

WASHINGTON - When U.S. Rep. Allen Boyd learned Florida planned to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$1.75 billion as part of an Everglades restoration project, he tried to glean details from every contact he'd made during two decades as a state legislator.

"I could not find one person who knew about this deal - not one," said Boyd, a Democrat who represents the Tallahassee area.

Other members of Florida's congressional delegation made the same complaint during a briefing Wednesday by leaders of various state agencies.

Dale Brill, director of Florida's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Development, told lawmakers that state officials plan to use newspaper inserts and a Web site to update communities about the buyout proposal.

But Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, told Brill the state should have reached out earlier to residents.

"It's a sad state of affairs when I'm a federal representative and the people in the community call me to try to reach you," he said.

Under the proposal, U.S. Sugar would sell 187,000 acres to Florida for \$1.75 billion, but would continue using the land for normal operations for six years. Most of the land is located in Palm Beach County, but parts are in Hendry, and Glades counties.

The acquisition is intended to help cleanse water headed south into the Everglades, as well as reduce harmful discharges from Lake Okeechobee into south Florida's coastal tributaries, including the Caloosahatchee River.

State officials and U.S. Sugar signed papers June 24 setting up a negotiating framework. They hope to close the deal by Nov. 30, said Michael Sole, secretary of Florida's Department of Environmental Protection.

Boyd and others questioned how the deal would affect Clewiston and other Lake Okeechobee towns that depend on U.S. Sugar, which employs more than 1,700 workers.

Brill said his agency's top priorities include retaining and retraining company employees.

Study: Sugar buyout to cost \$1.6 billion revenue, 10,700 jobs

07/31/2008
Naples Daily News
Layden, Laura

[Return to
Top](#)

By LAURA LAYDEN -Naples Daily News

Florida's buyout of U.S. Sugar Corp. may bring more water to the Everglades, but it will be a huge drain on the state's economy.

The deal could wash away \$1.64 billion in revenue annually and 10,711 jobs statewide, a draft study by University of Florida/IFAS researchers found.

"I think what remains to be seen is how deep those impacts are going to be. The study was kind of a worst-case scenario. It assumes that everything will disappear," said Gene McAvoy, a multicounty vegetable agent in Hendry County.

On June 24, the state announced a \$1.75 billion deal to purchase all of U.S. Sugar's assets to help restore the Everglades. The buyout includes more than 187,000 acres, a sugar mill and refinery, a citrus processing plant, machinery and buildings.

The details of the deal still are being worked out.

Palm Beach, Hendry and Glades counties would be hardest hit because that's where most of the grower's operations are based. Together, the three areas could lose 8,935 jobs, \$1.43 billion in revenue and \$368 million in labor income, the study says.

In Hendry and Glades alone, a quarter of total personal income could be wiped out.

In particular, Clewiston — where U.S. Sugar is headquartered — will see a drastic change.

"It could be pretty devastating to Hendry County's economy," McAvoy said.

"When you look at those numbers, those numbers are just phenomenal. It's like, 'Oh my gosh,' " said Janice Grove, executive director for Hendry County's Economic Development Council.

One of the researchers behind the study, Alan Hodges, an extension scientist for UF's Food & Resource Economics Department in Gainesville, said the effects of the buyout will be felt by many businesses, from banks and gas stations to grocery stores and clothing shops.

"Most of the money generated by U.S. Sugar stays in that local area," he said.

The study does assume that "everything would go away," although there's a possibility the company's processing and milling plants and some of its land could be sold back to other growers and remain in production.

"We don't know if it is all going to be permanently closed down," Hodges said. "That is yet to be determined."

U.S. Sugar has about 1,700 employees. But with the buyout, many other jobs from supporting businesses will go away.

Most of the lost jobs would be in agriculture. But manufacturing jobs also would disappear and so would at least 500 jobs in

transportation and warehousing, retail trade, health and social services and government, according to researchers.

Most of the hurt will come from the loss of the company's sugar cane operations because it's the bulk of its business, with about 150,000 acres dedicated to the crop. About 7,018 jobs could be wiped out statewide.

With the shutdown of its citrus operations, another 3,536 jobs could vanish, the study says.

Local, state and federal tax revenues could be reduced by \$127 million annually.

Researchers decided to do the study after hearing so many concerns raised about the cost of the deal and its economic impacts, Hodges said.

"I think the agriculture industry in general and groups like the Farm Bureau have been quite critical of this proposal because it does diminish agriculture in this state," he said.

There are others who think it's poor public policy to spend so much money on land for conservation, and some who question whether the money can be spent better elsewhere, Hodges said.

Some have criticized the plan, saying U.S. Sugar eventually would have to stop farming in the Everglades anyway because the mucky soils it grows on eventually will be gone.

"There is definitely a limited lifetime to these mucky soils in the Everglades Agricultural Area," Hodges said. "But we don't know what that is. It could be maybe only 20 more years. It may be 50 years."

Once a final agreement is signed, the buyout would put U.S. Sugar out of business in six years.

UF researchers will continue to refine their analysis and will look at other scenarios, including the possibility that other companies may buy some of its assets and continue its railroad operations, and at least parts of its citrus and sugar cane production.

"This study was just kind of a first cut," Hodges said.

Meanwhile, Hendry County and the cities of Clewiston and LaBelle have commissioned their own study to look at the effects just in their area.

"The IFAS report gives us a window or view of what we can expect in our report," said Mali Chamness, Clewiston's mayor.

She said it's not fair for Hendry County to suffer because of the deal. It already has the highest unemployment rate in the state.

There have been talks of bringing biofuel and solar plants to the county to help make up for the lost jobs. But it could be a long time before any projects get built — if they get built at all.

"I don't know of anybody who can say we can start tomorrow," Chamness said. "Nobody has told me that. I think all of this will take time — years probably."

She said the proposed buyout already is hurting the county.

"Our concern is that because of this transaction that we're going to be held captive and not be able to do anything," Chamness said.

"We've already seen with the announcement that real estate transactions have been canceled. Everything has been put on hold and we cannot afford for Hendry County or Southwest Florida to be put on hold over the next few months, next few years, or few decades."

Mapping the Everglades' Varied Landscapes

07/31/2008

Miller-McCune

Badger, Emily

[Return to
Top](#)

Different constituencies' visions of Everglades restoration may not look all that alike.

By: Emily Badger -Miller-McCune

Part 2 of a three-part series. In part 1, we examined the impossibility of truly restoring any habitat to pre-human condition. And in part 3 (July 31), the buyout of U.S. Sugar provides a different kind of restoration — to a time when big and bold was the hallmark of conservation.

Well before the state of Florida came up with the U.S. Sugar solution to the Everglades, engineers and conservationists in the area had been working on another answer, a complicated, controversial and pricey 30-year map called the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. It was approved by Congress in 2000 as part of the Water Resources Development Act, and at the time, it was envisioned as a \$7.8 billion, 50-50 federal-and-state partnership.

Now, the same conservationists and engineers will spend the next several years working out how the dramatic new land acquisition changes the CERP — and wondering if changes for the better will mean federal support that never arrived for the plan finally will.

The CERP was based on the premise that water from Lake Okeechobee couldn't be moved south, through an area the public didn't own. Canals couldn't hold all the water, there was nowhere to store it, and the water itself needed treatment.

"All that's changed," said David Guest, an attorney with Earthjustice. "Unfortunately, people spent an enormous amount of time and study on the CERP. And all those people, I'm sure, must feel to some extent like they were sitting on an easy chair over a trapdoor and the trapdoor got sprung."

That the premises of the plan are no longer true — "that's not bad," Guest said. "That's wonderful, because all of those were

problems that are about to be gone.”

The South Florida Water Management District will now own, after a six-year transition period, much of the “missing link” — land necessary to connect Lake Okeechobee with water conservation areas to the south and, below that, Everglades National Park.

Unfortunately, the soil has subsided in the newly acquired land. Topographically, it now looks less like a flat sheet than a saucer, Army Corps of Engineers expert Stu Appelbaum said. On its own, water won't naturally flow south as it once did; it will pool in the Everglades Agricultural Area saucer.

Much of the discussion over the next six years will center on how much man-made engineering will be necessary to push the water up and into the land farther south.

“That requires lots of pumps and gizmos and things like that, and that's what some of the fuss is: People want to see minimal human intervention,” Appelbaum said. “To me, it's not possible to put the system back to the way it was. That's unfortunate, but that's the reality of the system. The notion of going from a managed system to a completely unmanaged system is completely unrealistic. We could have a less managed system.”

Guest provides the non-engineering view.

“Engineers view the world as a plumbing problem,” he said. “Their impulse is to build reservoirs and pumping stations and canals and move things through cells and treat the whole thing as something that's really in their control.”

That's the attitude — we can control nature — that led us here in the first place. Many Army Corps of Engineers projects these days involve undoing past projects. Guest expects we'll eventually reach a balance between the two sides. Tom Van Lent, the senior scientist at the Everglades Foundation, supports pumping at the periphery and a natural flow in the heart of the Everglades.

“Natural” in this case, though, means not only holding back the gizmos but also eliminating the dikes and canals built years ago. A subset of the argument will be about where exactly the required man-made aids should go: Do we try to conserve the newly acquired land as well or use it exclusively to help revive the land farther south?

Also at issue will be the most controversial element of the CERP structure, an uncertain technology called “aquifer storage and recovery.” A main goal of the CERP was to help conserve water in wet years for later use during droughts, as opposed to letting that water flush out to the Gulf. Without land to store it above ground, the Army Corps of Engineers proposed creating several hundred deep underground wells where water could be injected and later retrieved.

But the Water Management District conceded that aquifer storage and recovery on this scale had never been applied, and before we could use the technology, we needed to invest considerable time and money testing and developing it.

For engineering insiders, the U.S. Sugar acquisition is a breakthrough in that it will totally reshape the aquifer debate.

"When I try to describe how big it is, it just sounds hyperbolic, like I'm exaggerating," Van Lent said. "From an engineering perspective, for me, the real importance of this is it allows a shift to a technology I know will work, to a time frame I might live to see."

Appelbaum, though, isn't ready to declare aquifer storage and recovery completely obsolete, adding that discussion to the list of compromises that will have to take place.

The CERP had one other, fundamental tension. It technically had two goals: the ecological revival of the Everglades and the management of water resources for economic development and urban sustainability in South Florida.

Little federal money for the plan ever arrived (an oddity, some point out, given that the Florida governor and U.S. president at the time were brothers). Guest suggests this was partly because conservationists complained that the CERP was starting to look more like an economic development project than an environmental conservation one.

It is not, after all, among the federal government's jobs to ensure a sustainable water supply for the people of Fort Lauderdale.

"But the federal government's role is very clearly defined as aiding and supporting environmental restoration," said Ron Tipton, the senior vice president for programs at the National Parks Conservation Association, a citizen-advocacy group that lobbies on behalf of the national parks. "The state has always been a little nebulous; they want it all: They want to restore the Everglades, and they want to build the hell out of South Florida. I think that was Jeb Bush's view."

Tipton also attributes the funding falloff to the Bush administration in Washington, which made less of a priority out of the Everglades as Al Gore had during the Clinton administration.

"You didn't have that kind of leadership coming from anyone high in the Bush administration," Tipton said. "Dick Cheney could care less. That changed things quite a bit."

So, too, did Sept. 11, which altered funding priorities overnight a year after the CERP was created.

Tipton thinks federal support for the Everglades could change dramatically under either Barack Obama or John McCain — he'd even like to see the two spar during the campaign over who would support the Everglades more. The U.S. Sugar deal, with fortuitous timing, is scheduled to be completed within 75 days of the original announcement, on the eve of the election.

The best hope for renewed federal funding, though, comes from the state itself.

"That's a big signal to the federal government that the state is stepping up at a level never seen before on this project," Tipton said. "Congress looks very carefully at what the state is doing, how much it's involved, how much leadership, and they measure that."

It will be a lot easier now for lobbyists to ask politicians in Washington why they aren't doing their part, too.

