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Sep. 21--The solution to South Florida's on-again, off-again water shortages keeps getting flushed out to sea after summertime rainstorms.

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However, corruption scandals and cost concerns dogged the original reservoir deal and a new venture with Palm Beach Aggregates faces serious political hurdles. 'It was politically radioactive. We gave up,' said Palm Beach County Water Utilities Director Bevin Beaudet. After resistance from the South Florida Water Management District, Beaudet said the utilities are now looking for other water sources.

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The reservoir at Palm Beach Aggregates was billed as an opportunity to take advantage of the property's unique sediment, described as a 'natural cement.' The district agreed to pay Palm Beach Aggregates \$217 million in taxpayer money to turn rock pits into an almost 60-foot-deep reservoir. The final payment of almost \$20 million could come before the end of the year.

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strengthened the embankment that keeps the water from swamping nearby homes and a new power plant under construction on land the company sold to the Florida Power & Light Co. Protesters on Saturday marched to Palm Beach Aggregates to oppose the power plant. Environmentalists have argued that it will add to pollution, strain water supplies and allow more damaging development to spread closer to the Everglades.

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Tomeu said he and his company were just witnesses for, not subjects of, the investigations. 'I can assure you we never had a quid pro quo with any politician ever on any deal that we have done,' Tomeu said. With or without a new water storage deal for future rock pits, Palm Beach Aggregates plans to keep mining, Tomeu said: 'We have a unique [sediment] formation here that doesn't exist anywhere else. It would be a shame not to take advantage of it.' Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

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09/21/2008

Jupiter Courier

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

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Editorial: Don't let delays hurt Everglades

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Word of delay in the state's planned purchase of U.S. Sugar's assets in the Everglades is troubling for a couple of reasons. The deal was supposed to be done by November; now it's "sometime in 2009."

Any further delay in the already bogged down Everglades restoration project is frustrating in itself. In Lee County, we are eager for this sale to be inked because it could lead to the long-sought diversion of polluted Lake Okeechobee water south, away from the Caloosahatchee River and its estuary.

The cost of Everglades restoration has escalated seriously over the past 10 years, and promised federal participation has lagged. Problems over details in the U.S. Sugar sale may compound those difficulties.

Second worry: The South Florida Water Management District is said to be looking for ways to defray the huge \$1.75 billion cost of the land deal by selling off some of the sugar company's assets or by seeking partners in the purchase.

Some of that sort of thing makes sense, but nothing should be allowed to change the top priority, which is the environment.

Restoring the Everglades and protecting the Caloosahatchee may not require ending sugar production on all U.S. Sugar's 187,000 acres. There should be room for continuing agriculture and for other kinds of economic development in the region, which stands to lose hundreds of farm jobs. But this should not be an opening for urban sprawl or industrial development.

Everglades restoration was deeply flawed from the beginning precisely because inadequate land was being bought south of the lake. Don't blow this chance to fix that flaw.

The first priority must remain creating the southern flowway for lake water. That will send much more of it back the way nature intended it to run, instead of dumping it in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers to devastate west- and east-coast coastal waters as it did in 2004 and 2005.

And it would be a shame to pass up the chance to create a vast new network of preservation lands where agriculture was so

unwisely planted.

Guest columnist: U.S. Sugar deal to undergo intense scrutiny

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ERIC BUERMANN Guest columnist
Sunday, September 21, 2008

The South Florida Water Management District is taking steps to strengthen the public process and safeguard tax dollars while negotiating the potential acquisition of the land and assets of U.S. Sugar Corp. in an historic effort to revive and restore the Everglades.

These efforts are specifically designed to address the significance and considerable investment of this "River of Grass" restoration opportunity.

The first initiative calls for an independent review of the potential U. S. Sugar transaction by an external group of financial experts to ensure value for this investment and a fair price for South Florida taxpayers.

The district has selected the Duff & Phelps Corp. to provide what is known as a "fairness opinion" on the proposed acquisition. The New York-based firm, which provides independent financial advisory and investment banking services, will deliver an opinion as to whether the transaction is fair, from a financial point of view, to public stakeholders.

The Duff & Phelps group will scrutinize appraisals, property and all aspects of the transaction and provide an independent report on the value of the acquisition. The group's findings will become part of the public record.

These actions reflect this board's ongoing commitment to safeguard the taxpayers of South Florida. These steps provide the financial assurances that our citizens expect and deserve as the district negotiates this large, complex and important purchase. Independent reviews add another layer of expertise to guarantee that the public receives the greatest return on its investment.

A second initiative, previously in use, amends and strengthens a "Beneficial Interest and Disclosure Affidavit" to provide further safeguards for taxpayer money. It will be used for all land acquisitions by the district to support environmental restoration, water quality improvements and flood control efforts.

The strengthened affidavit identifies anyone who may benefit from a land purchase with the district and requires disclosure of their interest in the transaction in writing. Florida law already requires parties who have a 5 percent or greater interest to disclose that information in any land acquisition negotiations with a state agency.

The district now requires anyone — regardless of the percentage of their ownership stake — to disclose their interest. The district also now requires anyone who stands to profit if a land purchase succeeds to disclose that gain to the public. The district's governing board directed the district to take this additional step to ensure that all public dollars invested during a land acquisition are utilized only for acquiring land and not on consultant's fees or other undisclosed costs, with the exception of attorneys' fees.

"Acquiring land for the benefit of the environment and the people of South Florida is essential to the district's mission," said Ruth Clements, the district's director of land acquisition. "These initiatives will further ensure that all public money set aside for land is spent directly on the land itself."

The affidavit wording and format was approved recently by the governing board. Its use is effective immediately for all land acquisitions involving the district. A copy of the affidavit is available.

"Together, these initiatives will further protect taxpayer funds, enhance accountability and transparency and strengthen the district's commitment to upholding and sustaining the public trust," said Carol Ann Wehle, the district's executive director.

As part of a historic plan to revive the "River of Grass," the district is negotiating the acquisition of as much as 187,000 acres of agricultural land owned by U.S. Sugar. The vast tracts of land in the Everglades Agricultural Area would be used to reestablish a part of the historic connection between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades through a managed system of storage and treatment and, at the same time, safeguard the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and estuaries.

Acquiring the enormous expanse of real estate offers water managers the opportunity and flexibility to store and clean water on a scale never before contemplated to protect Florida's coastal estuaries and to better revive, restore and preserve the "River of Grass."

The acquisition is subject to independent appraisals, due diligence, financing and approval by the district's governing board.

For more information about this historic Everglades restoration opportunity, visit this district Web site: www.sfwmd.gov/riverofgrass.

Eric Buermann is the chairman of the South Florida Water Management District Board of Governors.

How far north does Everglades go?

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Contributed by Tom Palmer - Posted: September 21, 2008 1:09:13 PM

The South Florida Water Management District has been referring to upstream areas along the eastern side of Polk County as the "Northern Everglades," but it looks as though someone down in West Palm Beach took this northern expansion a little too far.

As I was reading a legal advertisement today (yeah, I know, I need a life) I ran across an announcement for land acquisition for what appears to be some action in the U.S. Sugar deal, which is now part of what is called the River of Grass Everglades Land Acquisition Project, a name that doesn't seem to lend itself to a snappy and memorable acronym.

The problem was that the ad referred to acquiring land for the project in Gilchrist County. For those of you who may not be that familiar with the location of some of Florida's scenic rural counties, Gilchrist is North Florida in the Suwanee River Basin.

I'll be interested if SFWMD has to republish the ad. Oh, well, with a \$3.1 billion budget, I suppose they can afford it.

