

Subject: Today's U.S. Sugar News for October 2-3, 2008

SFWMD

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Report Everglades in decline as restoration lags

10/01/2008

Casper Star-Tribune

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - A multibillion-dollar effort to restore Florida's Everglades has made little progress amid funding shortfalls, bureaucratic red tape and disagreements, according to a congressionally mandated report that warns the vast wetland is in peril.

The National Research Council, in findings Monday, warned that degradation of the Everglades could become irreversible if action isn't taken quickly.

'The Everglades ecosystem is continuing to decline. It's our estimate that we're losing the battle to save this thing,' said William Graf, the report's committee chairman and head of the department of geography at the University of South Carolina at Columbia.

The South Florida Water Management District, which oversees restoration for the state, said in a statement that it agrees with the report's findings 'that restoration progress is hampered by limited federal funding and a complex and lengthy federal planning process.'

Approved by Congress in 2000, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was originally estimated to cost about \$7.8 billion and expected to take 30 years to complete _ a price tag that has since ballooned due to construction costs and other inflation.

The intent is to help restore some natural water flow after decades of dikes and diversions for development and agriculture, which have shrunk the Everglades to half its historical 4 million acres.

The 2000 plan made the federal government and Florida 50-50 partners. To date, the state has committed more than \$2 billion and pushed ahead alone with a few projects. Congress has only appropriated several hundred million dollars.

Lake Okeechobee, the liquid heart of the Everglades, remains heavily polluted with phosphorous mostly from fertilizer runoff. Wildlife habitat is disappearing and the report noted that at least 67 threatened or endangered species face extreme peril.

'Unless near-term progress is achieved on major restoration initiatives, the Everglades will likely face further loss of species

and habitat deterioration, which could be difficult or impossible to reverse,' the report said.

Meanwhile, the NRC committee commended Florida for its ambitious land acquisition, including a \$1.75 billion proposal to buy some 300 square miles of farmland from U.S. Sugar Corp. that has long been a hindrance to water flow. However, much of that land may remain in agriculture, and the committee noted effects of such a deal may be more than a decade away.

Dexter Lehtinen, a Miami attorney who represents the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians living in the Everglades, has consistently fought for restoration. He said the entire effort has been mired in talk and not enough action.

'That's going to kill the Everglades,' he said.

On The Net:

National Research Council report, Progress Toward Restoring the Everglades: The Second Biennial Review, 2008: http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id12469

A service of the Associated Press(AP)

Glades may need water utility to ease \$100 million debt crunch

10/01/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and MITRA MALEK

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Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee will consider creating an independent regional water utility to take over their aging, debt-ridden systems, administrators said this afternoon.

The plan, being spearheaded by county administrators and utility managers, would allow the cities to rid themselves of about \$100 million in debt - about \$27 million of which they are expected to face in the next five years.

Voter-mandated property tax cuts, coupled with job losses looming because of the state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U. S. Sugar Corp., has left the cities in 'dire straits,' Assistant County Administrator Shannon LaRocque said. 'The cities right now, they are potentially at risk of being in receivership,' she said. 'They are not able to pay that outstanding debt.' Under the proposal, the utility authority would take over that debt. It would be responsible for maintaining the system and billing customers, LaRocque said.

The independent authority would be created jointly by the cities and the county. Its board of directors would include members appointed by the county and all the cities.

In all, the cities owe about \$50 million for their existing utility lines and systems, or roughly \$50 a month for each utility

customer.

The cities owe another \$26 million for the construction of the Glades' new water plant, which opened last spring, LaRocque said. In addition, the utility systems will likely need roughly \$27 million in improvements over the next five years.

The \$58 million water plant, financed with help from state and county money, was intended to eliminating the cities' long-standing problems with smelly, discolored drinking water from Lake Okeechobee. Eight years ago, lab tests commissioned by The Palm Beach Post found high levels of suspected carcinogens in the tap water of Pahokee and South Bay.

LaRocque said the regional utility would help attract businesses and development. 'This is the best thing we can do to stimulate economic development,' LaRocque said. 'You have to have good roads, good water and good sewer. Bringing all of this infrastructure up to a level of service that is acceptable is our most important step in really creating a sound environment for economic development.' County administrators have presented the plan to officials in Pahokee and South Bay. Belle Glade leaders will consider it on Monday.

Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker declined to comment on the plan, saying it was a 'work in progress.' 'We've got to get all three cities on board to make this work,' he said. LaRocque said public meetings are being planned to discuss the utility proposal with residents.

Report Everglades in decline as restoration lags

10/01/2008

Sentinel, The
BRIAN SKOLOFF

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A service of the Associated Press(AP)

NASA delays repair mission to Hubble telescope Court: Great Lakes wolf returns to endangered list

SFWMD Strengthens Safeguards for Acquisition

10/01/2008

Immokalee Bulletin

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September 18, 2008

SFWMD strengthens safeguards for acquisitions

West Palm Beach, FL —The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) is implementing initiatives to strengthen the public process and safeguard public investments while negotiating the potential acquisition of the land and assets of United States Sugar Corporation in an historic effort to revive and restore America's Everglades. The initiatives 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 United States Sugar Corporation 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 Corporation 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," said Eric Buermann, SFWMD Governing Board Chairman. "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 taxpayers' monies. It will be used for all land acquisitions by the District to support environmental restoration, water quality improvements and flood control efforts.

The strengthened "Beneficial Interest and Disclosure 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 SFWMD 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 the SFWMD Director of Land Acquisition Ruth Clements. "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 today by the Governing Board. Its use is effective immediately for all land acquisitions involving the District. A copy of the affidavit is available on the District's Web site. Click on: Beneficial Interest and Disclosure Affidavit.

"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 SFWMD Executive Director Carol Ann Wehle.

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 the United States Sugar Corporation. 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 America's 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 fabled 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/river-ofgrass.

SFWMD Adopts \$2.97 Billion Budget

10/01/2008

Okeechobee News

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Sept. 28, 2008

SFWMD adopts \$2.97 billion budget

WEST PALM BEACH — At a public hearing Sept. 23, the Governing Board of the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) adopted a \$2.97 billion budget for Fiscal Year 2009 (Oct. 1, 2008 – Sept. 30, 2009). The budget returns an estimated \$24.3 million to South Florida taxpayers through the implementation of Amendment 1, while continuing to fund the agency's flood control and water supply missions as well as its continued progress to restore the Everglades.

"Through our belt-tightening efforts and prudent financial management, we have achieved a fiscally responsible budget that puts every dollar to maximum use," said Eric Buermann, SFWMD Governing Board Chairman. "This budget allows us to deliver financial savings while also delivering the many benefits of water management to the District's 7.5 million citizens and the South Florida environment."

The approved \$2.97 billion budget includes a significant investment in the environment this year: \$1.75 billion in Certificate of Participation funding for the proposed acquisition of land and assets from United States Sugar Corporation for the purpose of Everglades restoration. As a result of this historic opportunity, a full 87 percent of the FY09 budget is dedicated to this and to environmental restoration projects benefiting the Everglades, Lake Okeechobee, Kissimmee River and coastal watersheds.

"We recognize the investment required to accomplish this landmark Everglades restoration purchase," said Chairman Buermann. "We also recognize this opportunity as the most important environmental acquisition the District may ever undertake—one that will benefit Floridians and a unique national treasure for generations to come. We thank Governor Crist for his inspiration in this historic endeavor."

The approved 2009 budget reflects a \$24.3 million reduction in property tax revenues, in comparison with the current year. Additionally, the budget is in line with Governor Crist's direction to emphasize projects that are results-oriented and meet the planned, long-term needs of the region, with a goal to stimulate economic development in local communities.

Prior to Tuesday's budget-approval action, the FY2009 budget was reviewed by the Governor, the Department of Environmental Protection and the Chairs of both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees.

In a letter to the Senate Committee on General Government Appropriations, Chairman Buermann reiterated the District's considerable steps to reduce administrative and operational spending, improve efficiency and direct revenue toward project construction to both restore the environment and improve the quality of life for Floridians.

"Our cost-saving efforts are allowing the District to inject more revenues back into turn-dirt projects that directly improve water quality, develop water supplies, enhance the environment, provide flood protection and expand services for our communities," Chairman Buermann said.

The District's annual budget is funded by a combination of ad valorem (property) taxes, and by other sources such as federal and state revenues, permit fees and the Everglades Agricultural Area privilege tax. Less than 20 percent of the total 2009 budget comes from property taxes.

The approved tax rates, unchanged from Fiscal Year 2008, represent 62.4 cents per thousand dollars of value in 15 of the District's 16 counties (the Okeechobee Basin). For example, a home with a taxable value of \$200,000 (assessed value of \$250,000, less the \$50,000 homestead exemption) would see a total District tax bill of \$124.80. For Collier County and mainland Monroe County (the Big Cypress Basin), the tax rates represent 48.14 cents per thousand. A similar home in this region would see a tax bill of \$96.28.

Heartland Favors Inland Port

10/01/2008

Glades County Democrat
Bolan, Nena

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Sept. 25, 2008

Heartland favors inland port

Will Crist listen to FHREDI and others?

by Nena Bolan

Glades County Democrat GLADES COUNTY -- There is a wave of economic insecurity facing Americans, and it can be felt locally in Glades County. It was announced June 24, that the largest employer in the area, United States Sugar Corporation, will sell out to South Florida Wa-ter Management District.

The economic impact will also be felt by Glades County and the neighboring counties of Hendry, Okeechobee, High-lands, Hardee and DeSoto. All of these areas belong to an agency called Florida Heartland Rural Economic Development Initia-tive (FHREDI), which is a part of the governor's Office of Tourism, Trade and Economic Develop-ment (OTTED). The six counties in the Heartland are described by the state as fiscally constrained.

A study researched by the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sci-ences (IFAS) was published in July. According to the research, there is the potential evaporation of 10,711 jobs and a statewide economic downturn of \$1.6 bil-lion per year.

However, the buy out of the largest sugar producer in the nation has the potential to restore water flow and improve water quality to a giant national park, the Everglades.

The proposed acquisition plans are being discussed be-hind closed-door negotiations which has led to uncertainty and concern in the region; and K.S. "Butch" Jones, Glades County commissioner and board chair-man of FHREDI, called for an im-portant meeting of all six Heart-land counties that share regional economic goals. FHREDI's meet-ing took place Sept. 15 in Sebring and the main topic was the pos-sible creation of an inland port which would be a major distribu-tion center for freight transported by truck and rail. The proposed project would be implemented to offset the negative impact on the Heartland region.

Jim Otterman, FHREDI exec-utive director, was in attendance Sept. 15, whereby a resolution was adopted to show unani-mous support for development of the port in the region. He has been asked to provide some in-sight on the ideas expressed at the meeting; and on FHREDI's already existent Catalyst Project, which allows for each county to share revenue generated from businesses that choose to locate

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on designated sites that FHREDI has targeted for development.

Mr. Otterman mentioned that the sharing of revenue was not made as a specific part of the resolution. If a Catalyst Project site is selected for an inland port, then the ad valorem revenue sharing compo-nent is basically built in.

He was asked if regional offi -cials are confi dent that an inland port in the Heartland is possible. Mr. Otterman expressed an opin-ion that this can best be deter-mined by continuing to examine the issues that surround the con-cept such as exploring the future of global freight distribution. Then, see how south Florida fits in to the picture geographically. He commented that a site within Florida's Heartland could make a lot of sense for a variety of rea-sons.

"It is very important that any sites that become targeted for se-lection are able to be permitted and developed, or the region will not benefi t at all," said Jim Otter-man.

Coastal giant, Palm Beach County, has already started the process to encourage the development of an inland port within the county, possibly on property owned by Florida Crystals, another sugar company. However, the site is unpopular with environmentalists because it sits within the flow way needed to revive the Everglades.

An editorial about the Florida Crystals site appeared in the Sun Sentinel on Sept. 19. It was written by Margaret McPherson of Everglades Foundation, a non profit organization committed to reviving the natural wonder of the Everglades. It was mentioned that building the inland port on Florida Crystals' property would place it directly in the path of the flow way needed to restore sheet flow to the national park; and that siting it further west in Glades and Hendry Counties is preferable since this is the area that truly needs an economic boost.

Kirk Fordham, Everglades Foundation CEO, was contacted for input on the matter. He commented that locating the inland port at another sugar company's holdings in Palm Beach County "is extremely problematic" and that the communities most affected should be looked at seriously.

Earlier on Sept. 8, a proposal for consideration was submitted to South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) by Chris Doolin titled "A Commitment to Regional Stability and Growth", which highlights the impact of the district's buy out of U.S. Sugar Corporation with a proposed price tag of \$1.75 billion. According to Mr. Doolin's proposal, the acquisition will have a monumental impact on residents and businesses in Glades County, Hendry County and the cities of Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay. These rural, multi-cultural societies populate the land around Lake Okeechobee. He understands the potential impact because he has had first hand experience representing the Small County Coalition and the Small School District Consortium.

" These communities are the least capable of managing significant economic change," Chris Doolin said.

Some in the area may worry that a rural, undeveloped area like Glades County may find it difficult to get the attention of state leadership and big industry.

"I do feel that the citizens of Florida's Heartland deserve to have an opportunity to improve their quality of lifestyle, community, and economic future just as much as anyone else who is a Floridian," said Jim Otterman.

For more information on Chris Doolin's proposal go to www.sfwmd.gov and click on Everglades, then River of Grass-related material. For more information on Everglades Foundation go to www.evergladesfoundation.org. FHREDI information can be found at www.fhredi.com

Staff writer Nena Bolan can be reached at nenabolan@yahoo.com

Deep Well Technology Can Ease Lake O Releases

10/01/2008

Island Reporter

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Sept. 24, 2008

Deep well technology can ease Lake O releases

Guest commentary by ROBERT MALIVA, Ph.D.

With the return of summer rains in June, followed by a series of tropical disturbances, once again water managers have been forced to release large volumes of water from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee River and St. Lucie Canal.

While lowering the lake level is crucial to the integrity of the Herbert Hoover Dike, these discharges already have sent plumes of chocolate-colored water into our estuaries and coastal waters. It's too soon to tell whether the releases will trigger harmful algal blooms, but it certainly isn't an inviting sight nor will it benefit our tourism industry and local economy.

Restoring a more natural water flow southward from Lake Okeechobee through 180,000 acres to be acquired from U.S. Sugar Corp. surely will help reduce the volume future releases, but at best it is only part of the solution. Furthermore, given current economic conditions and the inherent slow pace of the bureaucracies involved, relief is at least a decade away, if at all.

However, proven technology exists today that can reduce these harmful discharges, while lowering the amount of damaging phosphorus that enters the lake in the first place. Two recent studies have demonstrated the feasibility of diverting excess water into deep injection wells. One scenario suggests that an array of 20 strategically placed deep wells could reduce Lake Okeechobee discharges by about 27 percent at a cost of approximately \$286 million.

In February 2008, the South Florida Water Management District incorporated test wells north of the lake into its Northern Everglades Initiative with a goal of diverting some nutrient-rich water before it reaches the lake. These wells should be a priority as funding and logistics move forward.

Deep well technology is nothing new. Municipal utilities in Florida have been using deep wells for over 30 years to safely discharge the highly treated effluent resulting from the wastewater treatment process.

The receiving zone is located approximately 3,000 feet below ground, and the injected water is effectively isolated from surface environments. It is clearly more desirable to safely disposal of excess water underground than to dispose of it in our estuaries and nearshore environments with its associated environmental damage.

The historic deep injection well experience in South Florida is an unqualified environmental success story. Aquatic/marine ecosystems along both coasts of South Florida have been protected by deep injection wells, as the wells have provided an alternative to marine discharge of this nutrient-rich freshwater.

A criticism raised concerning deep injection is that the freshwater is "lost." Of course, the water is also "lost" when it is flushed down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie, in addition to the significant harm to estuaries and local beach economies. The reality is that Florida receives a huge excess of rainfall during the

normal summer wet season, and only a small fraction of it could ever be put to a beneficial use or be used to restore the Everglades. The possibility also exists that some of the water injected in deep wells may also be recovered.

As we've just reached the peak of the hurricane season, with a steady stream of nutrient-laden, dark brown water flowing from the lake from the lake to our beaches, it makes sense to fast track funding for the deep well test project.

It is not "the" solution but one component in a broad combination of technology that can be employed to ensure sustainable use of our freshwater resources and protection of the environment long into the future.

(Dr. Robert Maliva is Senior Hydrogeologist at Missimer Groundwater Science in Fort Myers. Dr. Maliva has a Ph.D. from Harvard University and has held research positions at the University of Cambridge, England, and the University of Miami.)

Debt-saddled Glades cities consider water authority

10/02/2008

Palm Beach Post - Online

JENNIFER SORENTTRUE and MITRA MALEK

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Belle Glade, South Bay and Pahokee are considering creating an independent regional water utility authority to take over their aging, debt-ridden plants and pipelines.

The plan, spearheaded by administrators and utility managers, would allow the cities to rid themselves of roughly \$100 million in debt, about \$27 million of which they are expected to face in the next five years. It also could help lure much-needed development to the area.

Voter-mandated property tax cuts, coupled with job losses looming because of the state's proposed \$1.75 billion buyout of U. S. Sugar Corp., has left the cities in 'dire straits,' Assistant County Administrator Shannon LaRocque said. 'The cities ... are potentially at risk of being in receivership,' she said. 'They are not able to pay that outstanding debt.' Under the proposal, LaRocque said, the authority would take over the debt and would operate and maintain the system and bill customers.

The authority needs about \$5 million in start-up money, she said. One possible source for those funds, she added, might be by setting aside money from the sugar buyout.

The independent authority would be created by the cities and the county.

The authority would most likely contract for water services with the county, which has its own utility, until it were able to take over operations.

In all, the cities owe about \$50 million for their existing utility lines and systems, or roughly \$50 a month for each utility customer.

They owe another \$26 million for the construction of the Glades' new water plant, which opened last spring, LaRocque said. In addition, the utility systems probably will need roughly \$27 million in improvements in the next five years.

The \$58 million water plant, financed with help from state and county money, was intended to eliminate the cities' long-standing problems with foul-smelling, discolored drinking water from Lake Okeechobee. Eight years ago, lab tests commissioned by The Palm Beach Post found high levels of suspected carcinogens in the tap water of Pahokee and South Bay.

Before the plant opened this year, the cities were forced to spend millions of dollars to make sure their old water systems met federal and state water quality regulations.

LaRocque said the regional utility would help attract businesses and development. 'This is the best thing we can do to stimulate economic development,' LaRocque said. 'You have to have good roads, good water and good sewer. Bringing all of this infrastructure up to a level of service that is acceptable is our most important step in really creating a sound environment for economic development.' County administrators have presented the plan to officials in Pahokee and South Bay. Belle Glade leaders will consider it Monday.

Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker declined to comment on the plan, saying it was a 'work in progress.' LaRocque said public meetings are being planned to discuss the utility proposal with residents.

Glades restoration plan must not fail

10/02/2008

Miami Herald - Online

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Work together

This dismal record must change. The Everglades restoration plan needs two things -- now: determined leadership and money. The CERP plan needs a champion who can rise above the interagency bickering and stakeholders' proclivities to file lawsuits. That champion must be strong and committed enough to lead everyone toward the day, 30 or more years away, when the Everglades is restored to something akin to its original majesty.

The cleanup projects are overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District. Keeping vigilant watch over their shoulders are the other Everglades stakeholders: the Miccosukee Tribe, Big Sugar, several environmental groups that make up the Everglades Coalition, etc. It probably isn't true that the regulators and stakeholders spend more time fighting each other in court than working together in the field to implement the CERP, but it sure does seem like it.

State and federal officials have had a tendency to point fingers at each other while clinging tenaciously to their own turf. Until last year the state rightly took the feds to task because Congress hadn't put any substantial funding into the CERP plan. Florida has kicked in more than \$2 billion on restoration and \$4.8 billion on related projects. The state launched a land-acquisition program, and has, it says, purchased "99 percent" of the land necessary for restoration. It also has built vital water-storage areas.

Last year Congress finally allocated nearly \$2 billion for three CERP projects. This, however, is a drop in the bucket for the restoration price tag, which has ballooned to an estimated \$20 billion from the original \$8 billion. This is why the need for leadership is so urgent. The longer the projects are delayed the more they will cost -- and, the more likely they will lose the interest and long-term willingness of Congress to keep funding them. That loss would be a travesty.

Expedite projects

The committee that authored the National Research Council report also lamented the infighting, ongoing court battles and the Corps' cumbersome regulations and project approval systems, which keep projects on the drawing board for years.

The Corps is reorganizing its procedures and promises quicker project approvals. Good. Now if leaders would only step forward, the chances for the CERP plan succeeding would improve markedly. is pleased to provide this opportunity to share information, experiences and observations about what's in the news. Some of the comments may be reprinted elsewhere in the site or in the newspaper. We encourage lively, open debate on the issues of the day, and ask that you refrain from personal comments and remarks that are off point. In order to post comments, you must be a registered user of MiamiHerald.com. Your username will show along with the comments you post. Thank you for taking the time to offer your thoughts.

@Nyx.CommentBody@ OUR OPINION: More than ever, the River of Grass needs leadership, funding

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BOCC meets

By Patty Brant

INI Florida Former state representative and Hendry County commis-sioner Joe Spratt told the board that he felt the county could suspend its contract with a Tal-lahassee attorney with Holland and Knight, who is on contract to represent Hendry County's interests in the South Florida Water Management District's proposed purchase of United States Sugar Corp. and also the proposed inland port.

Mr. Spratt and Commis-sioner Kevin McCarthy both at-tend most of the USSC related meetings and Mr. Spratt said he's not convinced it's a "done deal." Finding the \$1.75 billion to purchase the property - much of which the state will have to fi nd another buyer for - is pretty "shaky," he said.

He also said the county needs to fi ght for the proposed inland port, adding that he feels Hendry County has the best site for what promises to be a huge economic boon to whichever community lands it.

In the end the board voted unanimously to suspend Mr. Curt Kiser's contract, which may be reactivated at any time by approval of both parties. Mr. Spratt said he believes the work can be handled at the staff level.

County Can Handle Sale, Inland Port

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County can handle sale, inland port

By Patty Brant

Caloosa Belle Former state representative and former Hendry County commissioner Joe Spratt told the board that he felt the county could suspend its contract with a Tallahassee attorney with Holland and Knight, who is on contract to represent Hendry County's interests in the South Florida Water Management District's proposed purchase of United States Sugar Corp. and also the proposed inland port.

Mr. Spratt and Commission-er Kevin McCarthy both attend most of the USSC related meet-ings and Mr. Spratt said he's not convinced it's a "done deal." Finding the \$1.75 billion to purchase the property - much of which the state will have to find another buyer for - is pretty "shaky," he said.

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Alternate Lake Okeechobee reservoir plan needs cash, land

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A potentially more cost-effective alternative to a reservoir intended to cleanse pollutants from the Caloosahatchee River is missing two key components - land in public ownership and money.

Disston Island, an 18,000-acre plot on the southwest edge of Lake Okeechobee mostly in the ownership of U.S. Sugar Corp., was presented Thursday to a state water resources committee. The island, which would be used as a filter marsh to cleanse lake water, likely would not require the pump and dam system needed for the C-43 reservoir, a 10,500-acre property along the river, just east of the Lee County line. A pump and dam system could cost tens of millions of dollars.

But with the state planning to spend up to \$1.75 billion to purchase U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration - and the federal government possibly about to spend \$810 billion to bail out the banking and lending industry - cash for either project could be scarce.

"I'm a realist," said Michael Collins, a member of the South Florida Water Management District governing board, one of the leaders in negotiations for U.S. Sugar. "Virtually every discretionary dollar for the next 10 years will be used for the U.S. Sugar deal. And we need to factor that our country is damn near broke."

Lake Okeechobee is the heart of a water management conflict that escalated after the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, when the lake level rose to 17 feet. That threatened the structure of the fragile Herbert Hoover Dike and its ability to prevent flooding in the towns south of the lake.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to avoid a disaster, sent water to the east and west, down the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers, and caused problems on both coasts. The water carried pollutants that created algal blooms along Southwest Florida coastlines, chasing people from beaches, a major component of the tourism industry, which in Lee generates \$2 billion annually.

Part of the solution, water managers realized, was to build reservoirs that could treat polluted water, such as the C-43 project. It is a \$500 million project.

The water management district was unable to provide a breakdown Thursday on the cost of the land and construction.

Because the U.S. Sugar deal surfaced this summer, money might disappear for construction of dams and pumps that would bring in water, cleanse it, then send it back into the river during dry times or when the reservoir is full.

Greg Rawl, a hydrologist known for his Lee County water supply study, teamed with environmental educator Bill Hammond to study Disston Island.

They did it on their own dime and time. They want everyone to understand the importance of Disston Island, mainly so it is not part of a potential land swap between the state and Florida Crystals sugar company, as the state tries to create a path for water to flow south from Lake Okeechobee into the Everglades, its natural path.

Disston Island would not need a major pump and dam system. Its elevation is lower than the lake, so the major construction would be a path for lake water that would naturally head southwest, first to Disston Island, then west to the river.

"We'd take water from the lake and run it through a treatment area," Rawl said. "And you don't have the pumping (of water), and energy costs are going up."

There is no cost estimate, and no timetable to create one, although Collins said water managers could help with a study to answer those questions. Completion of the sugar deal is necessary before Disston Island even becomes a possibility. The deal likely will not be finalized until early next year.

But environmentalists at Thursday's meeting were supportive of the proposal for Disston Island, a sugar-growing property that sits outside the Everglades restoration boundary and therefore is not subject to the same pollution laws drafted to protect the River of Grass.

