

Subject: U.S. Sugar Stories for Dec. 15**SFWMD**

Compiled by: South Florida Water Management District
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Total Clips: 9

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To Florida town, Everglades-Sugar deal doesn't look so sweet

12/14/2008

Los Angeles Times - Online

Fausset, Richard

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Reporting from Clewiston, Fla. The mayor of the place that bills itself as 'America's sweetest town' has learned to love the stench that wafts from the United States Sugar Corp.'s gigantic mill near the mucky banks of Lake Okeechobee. 'To us,' said Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness, 'it smells like money.' For decades, sugar has been the main economic driver of this isolated farming city of 6,800. Today, however, locals fear the industry, and its attendant smells, will dissipate for good if Gov. Charlie Crist succeeds in converting the surrounding cane fields into an ambitious restoration project for the Florida Everglades.

If the state buys the land -- and sugar production disappears -- Chamness wonders whether Clewiston will disappear along with it. 'We can't survive without the land,' she said. But a bitter small-town mayor is the least of the problems plaguing the \$1.3-billion project.

When Crist announced the plan in June, it was met with much fanfare and was widely seen as a legacy-defining gambit for the popular Republican governor. In recent months, however, critics and complications have emerged that may threaten the plan's chances of approval by a state water board, which is slated to vote on it Tuesday.

Particularly problematic is the economic mess beyond Clewiston's borders: The world financial meltdown has struck Florida particularly hard, saddling the state with a \$5.8-billion budget shortfall. Last week, a number of state legislators questioned the wisdom of borrowing the money to fund a 181,000-acre land deal during such uncertain times.

State Rep. Juan C. Zapata, a Miami Republican, noted that several billion dollars in extra funding would be needed to convert the land for restoration purposes. But he said no plan existed for raising the funds. 'I'm not questioning its environmental value,' Zapata said. 'But there are a lot of moving parts here, and there are a lot of unintended consequences we might not foresee.' The doubt has spread to the board of the South Florida Water Management District, the agency that must evaluate and approve the deal for the state.

In an interview Friday, board Chairman Eric Buermann said he had not yet decided how he would vote. He was torn, he said, between Florida's depressing fiscal realities and the rare chance to reclaim such a large and essential swath of the state's troubled ecosystem. 'The vision is wonderful, and it's something we've all dreamed about,' he said. 'But since the governor first conceived of this and asked us to analyze it, the economy has taken an earthshaking turn. . . . We don't want our legacy to be that we bankrupted our agency.' The water district, which represents 16 counties in South Florida, would finance the deal largely through 'certificates of participation,' which are similar to bonds. The borrowed money would be repaid over time from property tax revenue.

District officials had previously asserted that it wouldn't have to raise taxes to pay for the project. But Buermann said Friday that he could not make that promise, given the instability in Florida's real estate market.

The fate of the plan could affect the future political prospects of

Crist, who is often mentioned as a Republican presidential candidate in 2012 or beyond. In announcing the buyout, Crist said it was 'in the tradition of the great conservationist Teddy Roosevelt.' Some see the move as a way for Crist -- an abortion opponent and gun-rights advocate -- to reclaim the mantle of environmentalism for the GOP, and perhaps redefine a struggling national party. 'This would be a way, if he could pull it off, to maintain his base of support and steal the issue from the Democrats,' said Michael Martinez, a political scientist at the University of Florida

Crist, who was married Friday in St. Petersburg, could not be reached for comment.

But many environmentalists continue to cheer on the plan.

U.S. Sugar's vast land holdings lie in the flat, mineral-rich muckland between freshwater Lake Okeechobee to the north, and the protected but threatened wetlands to the south. The water district hopes to store large amounts of water on the property and build artificial filtering marshes that would clean the southward-flowing water of phosphorus, a mineral in fertilizer, that has proven detrimental to the habitats of birds, alligators and other wildlife. 'It's absolutely vital,' E. Thom Rumberger, head of the Everglades Trust, said of the deal. 'Everything that's ever been done in the Everglades has always been limited because we couldn't intrude into the agriculture.' The state Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative, meanwhile, has blasted the deal. The group is worried that the buyout will stifle competition because it would allow U.S. Sugar to lease the land back at below-market rates for seven years before it is turned over for conservation purposes.

Yet another potential complication: A large Tennessee farming concern has expressed its intention to purchase U.S. Sugar. The company, the Lawrence Group, hopes to buy the private sugar company for \$300 a share.

According to Buermann, the water district chairman, the Lawrence Group has stated its intention to work out a restoration project with the state. But Buermann said that there was no guarantee a workable deal could be reached with the company.

U.S. Sugar was founded in 1931 by industrialist Charles Stewart Mott. Since then, its fate has been inextricably tied to tiny Clewiston, providing residents not only with jobs, but with its golf course, its high-school athletic field and its white-columned old hotel, the Clewiston Inn.

After years of tussling with environmentalists, the company's current management is now trying to defend its environmental plan to worried locals.

Some residents are concerned that the company mill, though not part of the buyout deal, will be forced to shut down if much of the company's land is taken out of production.

Judy Sanchez, a company spokeswoman, said it was more likely that the mill would stay open. Because the deal allows the company to keep growing sugar cane for a number of years, she was optimistic that U.S. Sugar -- and the town -- would have time to adjust. 'We've got seven years to figure out what we're going to do,' she said. Officials have begun talking about how this little city

can survive if the cane fields disappear. Perhaps Clewiston could attract a distribution center.

They've talked about promoting ecotourism too. But Chamness doubted anyone would need help finding the wildlife that remain here in abundance. 'No one has to pay anybody to see a gator or a bird in this community,' she said. 'They're everywhere.' Fausset is a Times staff writer.

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US Sugar Deal Crucial for Everglades, Group Says

12/14/2008

St. Petersburg Times

Pittman, Craig

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This week marks a turning point in Florida's effort to restore the Everglades.

The state agency in charge, the South Florida Water Management District, will decide today whether to buy 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's land for \$1.34-billion.

The deal stems from a 2007 water district decision to halt a long-standing sugar industry practice of back-pumping polluted water into Lake Okeechobee. That prompted U.S. Sugar to appeal for help to Gov. Charlie Crist, who responded with the proposed buyout.

The Everglades Foundation, a small but influential environmental group focused on restoration, aided the ensuing secret negotiations by supplying the state with studies about how the sugar cane land could be used to help with restoring the River of Grass.

The group showed how it could be used for a series of manmade wetlands that could clean polluted water from the lake as it flows down Everglades National Park, replacing more complicated and expensive components in the current restoration plan.

The resulting contract before the water district today has drawn opposition from some lawmakers, as well as the Florida Farm Bureau.

Even Kirk Fordham, the politically connected CEO of the Everglades Foundation, agrees that the contract has its flaws. But in the end, he said he hopes the state will wind up owning the land. He recently shared his take on the deal with the St. Petersburg Times.

Why is it so important to acquire U.S. Sugar's land?

It's important to look at the bigger picture. The whole idea behind this grandiose initiative is to acquire land everyone once thought was out of reach. (With the sugar land in hand) you can now

design a restoration plan that's much simpler, more natural and less expensive. You'd be creating a dynamic ecosystem. We know that it'll work. It's just a matter of getting the land.

What's wrong with the deal that's on the table?

With the leaseback provision, sugar could be growing on that land for seven years or more before the state gets it. We have some real problems with that. And mining activity would be permitted right in the middle of the footprint for restoration. We've been pushing the Crist administration to make amendments to the contract and make it a better deal.

What's the reaction of state officials to your pushing for an amended contract?

I think they recognize they got as far as they could with the U.S. Sugar management team. They believe they got the best deal they could at the bargaining table. (But a vote to reject the contract) could send the negotiators back to the negotiating table. ... My hope is that for once these folks who have done business around Lake Okeechobee for so long will agree to a plan that accommodates the economy and agriculture, but keeps in mind that if we don't restore the Everglades we're not going to have these industries anymore anyway, since there won't be a water supply. It's in everyone's interest to come to the table.

What happens if the state fails to acquire that land?

Unless the state gets that land, the likelihood is that U.S. Sugar will parcel it out a little at a time to developers and other agricultural interests and we will have lost forever our chance to acquire it all at once. So if it's a choice of this deal today or no deal forever, I think we should take the deal.

What about the concerns about the effect on U.S. Sugar's work force and all the lost jobs in the cities around Lake Okeechobee?

We can't rely solely on the sugar industry to keep people employed. If we don't fix the Everglades, we lose many more jobs in fishing, boating and the tourist industry, because they all depend on a healthy ecosystem. (He pointed out that a new flow-way across U.S. Sugar's land could replace the current practice of releasing excess water from Lake Okeechobee into the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, which has repeatedly led to pollution-fueled algae blooms on both coasts.) Who wants to buy waterfront property when the water is green and it smells?

Deadline Nears for Everglades Restoration Project

12/14/2008

Associated Press

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Associated Press - Story ran in various publications state-wide.

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — The South Florida Water Management District faces a Tuesday deadline to decide whether to pay \$1.34 billion to U.S. Sugar Corp. for a vast farming tract needed for an ambitious plan to restore the Everglades.

District approval is required to realize the turnover of some 180,000 acres of land — or about 285 square miles. It would amount to the most expensive conservation land purchase in state history, the cornerstone of environmental efforts to restore natural water flow to the Everglades after decades of overdevelopment and farming.

The wetlands once covered more than 6,250 square miles but have shrunk by half, replaced with homes and farms and a 2,000-mile grid of drainage canals. In the process, the Everglades has lost 90 percent of its wading birds. Other creatures are reported at risk, too, including 68 species that are considered threatened or endangered.

While Gov. Charlie Crist basked in the praise of environmentalists when the first proposal for a land deal with U.S. Sugar was announced in June, and again after a scaled-back pitch last month, opponents are growing louder.

Among them is former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, who like others, questions whether the state is paying too much — potentially burying itself in debt and eventually crippling the deal altogether.

Graham wonders why the federal government isn't helping in the purchase despite an 8-year-old agreement to split Everglades restoration costs evenly between Tallahassee and Washington.

"I haven't heard any compelling argument why we should pay significantly more than the market price," Graham said.

Nat Reed, a Hobe Sound environmentalist, offered one reason: U.S. Sugar might back out.

Executives at U.S. Sugar, the nation's largest producer of cane sugar, say they will not return to the negotiating table if the contract is rejected Tuesday.

"The board would be taking a chance that Sugar would walk and that this great opportunity would be lost," said Reed, a former water manager who was assistant interior secretary under Presidents Nixon and Ford. "It's a really tough call."

Under the contract, U.S. Sugar could continue to farm for seven years, leasing the land back for a total of \$54 million, a quarter of typical market value.

Competitors, including Florida Crystals and the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida, call the proposed contract terms a sweetheart deal that would give U.S. Sugar an unfair edge.

But U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert Coker scoffs at such criticism.

He said opponents are overlooking the fact that his company's land sits in the heart of the priceless Everglades.

"If you want to restore sheet flow (of water) from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, you've got to use U.S. Sugar land," he said.

Water managers want the land to construct a network of marsh treatment areas and reservoirs to clean and store water before sending it south into the Everglades.

Regardless of the proposed deal, some 300,000 acres in the Everglades, or about 500 square miles, will remain in agriculture production by other companies.

New appraisals, competitor raise doubts for proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar

12/15/2008

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

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Once again, Florida finds itself haggling with Big Sugar for the future of the Everglades.

The state faces a Tuesday deadline to approve a \$1.34 billion deal to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp., Florida's largest sugar producer.

The farmland that was once part of the River of Grass would be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

While appraisals released Friday show the state could be paying \$300 million too much for the land, U.S. Sugar contends it offers a fair price and already is shopping for other takers. Further complicating the deal is the other half of Big Sugar, Florida Crystals. The sugar company controlled by the Fanjul family went to court last week to challenge the South Florida Water Management District's plan to borrow most of the money to pay for the U.S. Sugar land.

Florida Crystals argues that instead of an environmental boon, the proposed land deal would become a taxpayer-funded bailout for its chief competitor.

And even if the state gets U.S. Sugar's 180,000 acres, restoration plans still could require 65,000 acres most of it owned by Florida Crystals to complete the link from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

Leaving the decision in the hands of the water district board, which meets today and Tuesday to consider the deal, could bode well for U.S. Sugar.

After all, Gov. Charlie Crist who appoints the district's board proposed the U.S. Sugar deal and supported the \$1.34 billion cost. 'His appointees to the water management district will be

behind it as well,' U.S. Sugar Senior Vice President Robert Coker said.

District Board Chairman Eric Buermann concedes that the governor wants the district to take the deal, which Crist in June announced with much fanfare as a way to recreate the Everglades' 'missing link.' But much has changed in the six months of negotiations since, Buermann said.

The new appraisals prepared for the district heightened concerns about the price.

Factor in a worsening national economic crisis and questions remain about whether the district can afford to buy the land and then build the reservoirs and water treatment areas. 'I'm still struggling with my own vote,' Buermann said Friday. 'It's a different world.' An Everglades restoration plan announced in 2000 was forced to work around U.S. Sugar's and Florida Crystals' cane fields, storing water underground and pumping it south to reservoirs and treatment areas.

Lack of federal funding slowed those plans, and in June Crist announced his new effort to reshape Everglades restoration.

Crist first proposed a \$1.75 billion buyout of all of U.S. Sugar's land and facilities to close down the company and move it out of the way of restoration.

In November, Crist announced a scaled-down deal to buy most of U.S. Sugar's land but allow the company to keep its sugar mill and other assets it could use to stay in business.

Environmental groups have hailed the land deal as the Louisiana Purchase of Everglades restoration gaining prime territory to ensure a future for the River of Grass.

Lakeside communities worried about losing agricultural jobs warn that the deal could bring them economic ruin. If the state takes farmland out of production, then the state needs to help attract new industry and jobs, Clewiston Mayor Mali Chamness said.

Under the state's original proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals was willing to consider buying U.S. Sugar's assets, such as the Clewiston mill, as well as farmland not needed for Everglades restoration, Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens said. The new deal, which allows U.S. Sugar to lease back its land and pursue longer leases after seven years, could get in the way of the land swaps the state proposed to complete its link between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, said Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens.

Florida Crystals' opposition comes as no surprise, Coker said. 'This is about the Fanjuls and their own pocketbook,' Coker said. Even if approved, the state's proposed deal allows U.S. Sugar to shop itself around to rival buyers for two months.

If U.S. Sugar opts to go with a different buyer during that two-month window, the company would have to pay a \$40.2 million 'break-up' fee. 'We are not married yet,' Buermann, the district chairman, said.

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Fla. sugar deal may boost Flint charities

12/15/2008

Detroit News - Online

Francis X

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FLINT -- Sickly sweet smoke from the sugarcane fields of Florida -- locals call it the smell of money -- flows all the way to this impoverished Michigan city.

That's because four Flint charities own nearly half the stock of U. S. Sugar Corp., the nation's biggest and oldest grower of cane.

And now, with the company poised to sell most of its land to Florida in a deal expected to be approved Tuesday, the charities stand to reap \$333 million from the transaction.

But the windfall could be delayed indefinitely by several legal challenges and opposition that seems to grow by the day.

In the meantime, the charities operate without U.S. Sugar stock dividends, which were suspended by the financially struggling company in April. 'Times are bad,' said Rosalind Jackson, 33, a homeless woman staying at the Shelter of Flint, which receives funding from several of the charities. 'We need all the help we can get.' Among those opposing the deal are residents of Clewiston, the Florida community that is home to U.S. Sugar.

For 77 years, the company has been the dominant employer and taxpayer in the small burg, which bills itself as 'America's Sweetest Town.' The land sale would lead to the closing of U.S. Sugar and devastate a county that has the highest unemployment rate in the state -- 14 percent. 'It's just not good,' said Butch Wilson, 57, a Clewiston Museum director who was laid off by the company last year after 32 years. 'It's not good for the company. It's not good for the town.' Clewiston's looming loss puts Flint in an awkward position.

The Michigan city knows all about company towns that lose their companies. It has been devastated by the quarter-century-long departure of General Motors Corp.

But now one depressed city stands to gain from another depressed city's loss of its main employer. 'Nobody ever wants to profit from other people's loss,' said John Manse, director of the North End Soup Kitchen, a Flint agency that receives grants from several of the charities.

Two of the Flint charities, Ruth Mott Foundation and the Mott Children's Health Center, didn't respond to e-mails or phone calls asking for comment.

The other two charities, C.S. Mott Foundation and the Community Foundation of Greater Flint, declined to answer questions, instead releasing statements that didn't specifically address the issue.

When the proposed land sale was announced by Florida Gov. Charlie Crist in June, it was hailed by environmentalists and newspaper editorial writers.

The state would pay U.S. Sugar \$1.34 billion for 283 square miles of farmland that would be used to save the ailing Everglades.

By turning the land into reservoirs and marshes, the state would restore the natural flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico.

The money will come from bonds backed by property taxes of south Floridians for 30 years.

But it didn't take long for the cheers to turn to jeers.

Among the growing chorus against the sale are public officials, rival farmers, unions and Clewiston residents and businesses.

They say the deal is too rushed, too expensive for taxpayers and too favorable toward U.S. Sugar.

It amounts to a taxpayer bailout of a financially troubled company at a time when the state could least afford it, said Juan Zapata, a Florida state representative.

Florida's budget is so bare it had to cut \$1 billion from public education. 'We're in the midst of one of the most severe economic recessions in the history of our region, our state and the nation,' Zapata said. Hurt by foreign competition, U.S. Sugar stated in its annual report that it will lose money this year.

Critics also have seized upon a part of the deal that allows the company to lease back the land for seven years while the state prepares to restore it to its natural condition.

The lease price is \$50 an acre, which is a fourth of the price now paid by farmers.

Rival businesses say the low price will give U.S. Sugar an unfair advantage as it continues to compete against them during the seven years.

Other farming companies have launched a feverish campaign to scuttle the land deal.

Yet another possible legal fight involves the four Flint charities that are shareholders of U.S. Sugar.

The Lawrence Group, a mammoth Nashville farming company that has been trying to buy U.S. Sugar for several years, claims that its bid would benefit shareholders more than the land sale.

Shareholders would receive \$300 a share right away under the Lawrence deal instead of waiting seven years for the land sale to be completed. 'This deal is a win-win for everyone,' said Gaylon Lawrence Jr., who, along with his dad, runs the company.

But Lawrence claims the charities are bound by confidential agreements that prevent them from selling their shares to anyone trying to take over U.S. Sugar.

That runs counter to a federal law requiring charities to maximize

their assets on behalf of their beneficiaries, in this case the poor of Flint.

Sugar's Big Deal Still Not Assured

12/15/2008

Miami Herald

Morgan, Curtis

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Bookmakers aren't posting odds on whether water managers will sign the \$1.34 billion sugar deal or shoot it down. If they were, wise bettors would lay off.

Unlike most decisions made by the South Florida Water Management District, Tuesday's crucial governing board vote appears a toss-up.

Gov. Charlie Crist's blockbuster bid to buy cane fields and convert them into Everglades projects may pass. But board approval is not the slam-dunk it seemed six months ago. With opponents last week ramping up a campaign from Miami to Tallahassee, failure is an option.

Even environmentalists, who dubbed the vast sugar fields "the holy grail" of Glades restoration, admit to reservations -- topped by the prospects of rock mines bordering marshes and paying longtime nemesis U.S. Sugar Corp. top dollar for land then leasing almost all of it back at a quarter of going market rates for seven years.

"This is a deal that makes absolutely no sense," said district board member Michael Collins, who contends most of the tracts aren't needed and in the wrong place.

"Just like the holy grail, this is based on a myth," he said. "If you get rid of the [sugar industry], you solve all the Everglades problems. It's not true."

Aside from Collins, an Islamorada fishing guide who ranks as the bluntest board critic, the other six voting members have not tipped their hands. But each has questioned the costs and trade-offs of turning a bold vision into a binding contract with a shrewd, politically powerful corporation.

There will be more questions Monday when district financial experts lay out grim state revenue estimates. The dwindling budget is likely to force major program cuts and leave little money to build reservoirs and pollution treatment marshes envisioned to replace sugar fields, a \$4 billion proposition.

The board's dilemma is difficult: Buy land essential to reviving the Everglades at the price of further delaying projects needed to restore the system -- for years, perhaps a decade or more. It's made tougher by a take-it-or-leave-it clause and deadline demanded by U.S. Sugar for the complex deal.

"In a way, it's a bizarre negotiation," said board member Patrick

Rooney Jr., president of the Palm Beach Kennel Club. ``I am a business person. Normally, I would tell someone, here is what I want . . . and there would be some back and forth."

Kirk Fordham, executive director of The Everglades Foundation, argues short-term concerns aren't enough to risk losing what could be the sole chance to fix problems that for decades have sickened not only Everglades marshes but South Florida's entire ecosystem, from Florida Bay to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers.

`A HUGE WIN'

"You are basically taking a huge tract of land from Big Sugar and saying we are going to use a good portion of it to save the Everglades and restore its flow of clean water," Fordham said. ``It's a huge win if it passes."

The deal's influential sponsor also remains behind it, despite growing controversy.

"Gov. Crist is committed to Everglades restoration and looks forward to a positive vote by the South Florida Water Management District," said spokesman Sterling Ivey.

That may be enough to swing things. Crist selected every board member except Collins and though they vote independently, appointees historically adhere to a governor's agenda. Still, much has changed since June when Crist unveiled his plan to restore the Everglades' "missing link" -- a connection between Lake Okeechobee and marshes long severed by sugar fields -- after months of secret negotiations with the company.

The economy has tanked, delivering drastic cuts to state revenues and budgets and higher interest rates for bonds that would bankroll the deal. Over 30 years, it could wind up costing nearly \$3 billion.

Opposition also has swelled. In Clewiston and other rural communities, business and political leaders warn of lost jobs and "ghost towns." State lawmakers from Miami and Bradenton, citing a shriveling budget they say will force cuts to programs for kids and grannies, have urged postponing the vote.

HARDER BARGAIN

Even some environmentalists want water managers to drive a harder bargain, to forbid mining and get the land faster, cheaper and under terms friendlier to the Glades than to U.S. Sugar's profit margins. Among many questions is the fate of U.S. Sugar's 89 water permits and rights to 40 billion gallons.

"I don't accept that this is the final deal," said David Anderson, executive director of Audubon of Florida. ``We want this to happen, but I'm not ready to give a yes or no."

Other growers say the deal -- particularly a \$50-an-acre annual lease for land that normally averages around \$200 -- threatens their businesses.

Gaston Cantens, a vice president for Florida Crystals, the region's second-largest grower, called it a bailout that would make U.S. Sugar -- more than \$600 million in debt and coming off a money-

losing year -- a dominator with a taxpayer-subsidized advantage.

'ON STEROIDS'

"It'll be a sugar company on steroids," he said.

Florida Crystals, controlled by the Fanjul family, rivals U.S. Sugar for political clout. But no changes or delays were won last week at a Tallahassee meeting with district executives and top Crist aides.

Cantens said the initial deal the company backed -- a total buyout of U.S. Sugar and land swaps with Florida Crystals to create a "flow way" between the lake and Glades -- has been radically retooled. On Friday, the company filed papers in Palm Beach County court challenging the district's bond issue.

"It's been frustrating because the whole deal changed from one day to the next," Cantens said. Now, he said, "there is nothing to trade for seven years."

Robert Coker, a U.S. Sugar vice president, said Florida Crystals was trying to undermine a fair deal, months in negotiation, with "huge statewide and national environmental significance."

"They have chosen to wage an all-out war against Gov. Charlie Crist's bold vision," he said. "This is clearly about protecting their own interests and the Fanjuls' pocketbooks, not the Everglades."

Coker cautioned that U.S. Sugar wasn't bluffing about its deadline and would not accept board counteroffers.

"There is no going back to the table," he said. "If you open up one paragraph, you have to open a hundred."

Coker insisted the board will back the governor. Others believe they won't.

District managers, who worked alongside lead negotiator Mike Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, aren't providing a recommendation. That's unusual.

BOARD'S DECISION

"This is a monumental decision and I think they want to make it themselves," said Carol Wehle, the district's executive director.

Two board members, Rooney and chairman Eric Buermann, a Miami attorney, said they have not yet made up their minds. Collins, despite his criticism, would not say if he has. Four others could not be reached or did not respond to calls and e-mails.

Buermann likens the land buy to a mission to the moon, a landmark project with value that exceeds the cost of the real estate. He also sees legitimate concerns.

"We have to see if these issues can be resolved and reconciled," he said. "The ball is in our court and nobody else's."

Seal Deal for Everglades with US Sugar Purchase

12/15/2008

Pensacola News Journal

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South Florida Water Management District officials will make a mistake if they do not complete a major land deal crucial to restoration of the Everglades.

Restoring Florida's famed River of Grass is important not just to the South Florida environment, but to its economy, as well. Because ensuring adequate drinking water for an increasingly thirsty peninsula is a prime goal of the project.

The deal is supposed to be closed Tuesday, when the district's board is expected to approve it.

But pockets of opposition have cropped up from local governments and area legislators fearing the loss of jobs and tax revenue from the eventual closing of the U.S. Sugar operations on the land.

Even delaying the approximately 180,000-acre purchase could cause it to be lost, as developers have also expressed interest in the land, which is considered crucial to restoring natural water flows to the upper Everglades.

The purchase is part of a much larger Everglades restoration, designed to reverse some — but not all — of the damage done to the Everglades by decades of development and drainage.

State officials had long sought the land, south of Lake Okeechobee, as a necessary piece of the puzzle to reassemble any significant part of the Everglades' original shallow, sheet water flow, which is critical to its natural function and health.

The purchase would also allow construction of wetlands that would act as natural filters to cleanse polluted stormwater flowing to the Everglades and would remove the cane fields that have been a major source of nutrients that have changed and degraded the ecology of the huge wetland.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who has been a strong supporter of the purchase and of the overall restoration, should exert his influence to urge the board to complete the purchase agreement Tuesday. To let this land slip away would be a major blow to Everglades restoration efforts.

Plan to Save Everglades Could Be Finalized

12/15/2008

Sarasota Herald-Tribune
Spinner, Kate

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The state's latest plan to save the Everglades by spending \$1.34 billion on the acquisition of U.S. Sugar lands could be finalized as early as today.

The nine-member governing board for the South Florida Water Management District begins meeting today and Tuesday to discuss the deal, brokered by Gov. Charlie Crist and U.S. Sugar management earlier this year.

Under the plan, the 16-county water district, which encompasses South Florida, would need to trade thousands of acres of the U.S. Sugar property to stitch together a continuous swath of land between Lake Okeechobee and the remaining Everglades.

Reservoirs would be built to recreate a semblance of the historic water flow between the lake and the river -- a long-held dream for proponents of Everglades Restoration.

The language in the contract between the district and the sugar company requires the board's approval and signature by Tuesday.

But approval of the deal faces hurdles, as it has come under fire by a handful of very vocal critics.

Friends of the Everglades and the Miccosukee Indian Tribe fear the deal will delay restoration projects in the works. Others question the rush toward approval at a time when financial resources are tight.

Last week Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, wrote a letter to Crist urging him to delay the vote on the sugar deal until February. Bennett said he wanted to hold a hearing to allow the public to "vet" the purchase in front of the state Legislature's Community Affairs Committee, which he chairs.

Also, the Lawrence Group, one of the nation's largest owners of farmland, is vying to take over U.S. Sugar.

The company has bid three times to buy U.S. Sugar, including its latest offer in late November to buy it for \$300 a share. The Lawrence Group also has challenged U.S. Sugar's contention that its shareholders would receive \$365 a share under the deal with the state.

Gaylon Lawrence Jr., president of the large farming firm, wrote a scathing criticism of the state's proposal and directed it to members of the South Florida Water Management District Board on Thursday.

Lawrence accused U.S. Sugar management of pushing the deal through to the detriment of its employees and to the state's financial coffers.

The governing board will hear public comment on the proposal beginning today and possibly on Tuesday as well.

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Letter to Editor

12/15/2008

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Deal a bold move for U.S. Sugar, state, Everglades

As we approach Tuesday's vote regarding the South Florida Water Management District's contract to purchase 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's land, those who do not want this deal to occur are attempting to cloud the issues.

In no way does this signal a corporate buyout of U.S. Sugar. Simply put, the state is buying land for Everglades restoration. Independent, professional real-estate appraisals conducted for the district set the fair market value of the purchase. Paying fair-market value for real estate is hardly a "bailout." U.S. Sugar will continue to operate within its communities and be a partner in developing economic opportunities.

We must remain focused on the purpose of this transaction. This agreement is a historic opportunity to effect real and meaningful restoration of Florida's Everglades - a point that has been made by countless individuals and organizations who have dedicated their lives to restoration. Gov. Crist's bold vision and this acquisition finally will provide a real opportunity to fully preserve a national treasure for future generations.

Sometimes, issues really are that simple. U.S. Sugar has built a company that is the pillar of the agriculture community. Gov. Crist presented us with an opportunity to be part of something much grander and more historic than we ever dreamed. Without a doubt, we would not be doing this if we didn't believe it was a fair deal for our shareholders, but, more important, this is a tremendous opportunity for our state and its people.

It is time to move forward with the decision to implement this bold initiative.

ROBERT COKER, senior vice president

U.S. Sugar Corp.

Clewiston

