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Advocates Hope for Everglades restoration rests with Obama White House

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Miami Herald - Online

CURTIS MORGAN

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Everglades restoration has fallen years behind and costs have spiraled billions beyond original estimates. But for leaders of the Everglades Coalition, which Thursday evening opened its 24th annual conference in Miami, prospects for reviving the struggling River of Grass look the brightest in years.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who will be the keynote speaker Friday for the largest annual gathering of conservation groups in the state, has delivered a massive infusion of land in the form of sprawling sugar fields. Next, activists hope for a serious infusion of another essential element to kick-start stalled projects: federal bucks.

Environmentalists are banking that President-elect Barack Obama will extend his campaign pledge of "change" to the Bush administration's spotty Everglades funding record. Since the state-federal plan was approved by Congress in 2000, Florida has outspent its partner 6-1.

Environmentalists are pitching 10 projects, including overhauls of the Tamiami Trail and C-111 and L-31 canals in Miami-Dade County, for inclusion in the Obama economic stimulus package -- with a target of \$300 million this year and \$550 million next year.

"Now is the time for the federal partner to step up," said April Gromnicki Smith, a lobbyist for The National Audubon Society in

Washington, D.C. "The state has done all it can do."

Just how much a new administration facing the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression can deliver remains unclear. In two months of meetings with members of the Obama transition team, coalition leaders, managers of federal agencies and congressional and Senate staff have gotten no promises.

"Everything is still very fluid right now," said an aide to U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Florida. "There are no numbers yet. We're letting them know what our environmental priorities are, and the Everglades sits at the top of the list."

Activists are uncertain if any Obama aides or transition team members will even attend the Everglades conference. Smith is moderating a Friday panel on the role of the White House in restoration but, she said, there had been "no takers. They have certainly been invited."

Transition team members reached would not comment.

Still, activists are optimistic, saying Everglades projects fit perfectly with Obama's goal to create "green jobs" and its call for "shovel-ready" stimulus projects. According to a package of recommendations that environmental groups presented in November to the transition team, the \$300 million in Glades projects would create nearly 3,000 jobs.

During a campaign swing through Florida in October, Obama pledged to make restoration "a top environmental priority" and to start paying the federal share of a project now expected to run as much as three times its original \$8 billion price tag.

There is a lot of catching up to do. Last year, the U.S. Government Accountability Office calculated that Florida had spent \$2 billion on the 68 restoration projects approved in 2000, six times more than the federal government. It also has spent \$4.8 billion on related Glades efforts, double the federal share.

And that doesn't include the \$1.34 billion deal to buy 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp., a proposal that faces some uncertainty of its own in the form of legislative criticism, lawsuits and financing challenges.

With thousands of potential projects from highways to hospitals under consideration, there will be intense competition for a cut of the Obama economic program.

Without a significant chunk of federal cash, restoration efforts could literally grind to a halt. South Florida water managers have warned that bankrolling the sugar deal will leave scant dollars for other Everglades projects.

That largely puts the hope of restoring the natural system any time soon into the hands of the Obama White House, acknowledged Mark Perry, co-chair of the coalition and executive director of the Florida Oceanographic Society.

"We're putting all our eggs in one basket," he said. "They're either going to step up to the plate or not."

Sixteen more suitors show up to offer U.S. Sugar a deal

01/08/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

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U.S. Sugar Corp. says 16 other suitors are interested in buying some or all of the Clewiston-based sugar giant - each representing a potential spoiler to Gov. Charlie Crist's landmark, \$1.34 billion deal to buy its farmland for Everglades restoration.

Under the 180,000-acre land deal state water managers approved Dec. 16 with a 4-3 vote, the state has the right to match any offer made between now and Feb. 22. That's the deadline for the 60-day period during which U.S. Sugar must shop for competing offers, according to law in Delaware where the company was incorporated.

But a better offer could increase what critics already say is an inflated price, assuming the state opts to follow through on the purchase. The state's contract with U.S. Sugar sets a closing deadline of Sept. 25. 'There's a lot of interest in this 'go-shop' 60-day period,' said Robert Coker, a U.S. Sugar executive vice president.

Other bidders include the Lawrence Group, a father-son agriculture concern out of Nashville, which launched what amounts to a high-profile hostile takeover attempt midway through the state's negotiations with U.S. Sugar. Company executives previously dismissed the Lawrence Group's \$300-per-share offer as a public relations stunt.

But Coker said U.S. Sugar's financial advisors now are working with the Lawrences and the other potential buyers to sign confidentiality agreements and enter detailed negotiations.

Should a better offer emerge, 'my guess is the (U.S. Sugar) board's going to accept it,' Coker said. 'But the state has the right to match it.' Critics of the deal have questioned how much executives of the struggling, 77-year-old sugar giant stand to earn in bonuses or 'golden parachutes' if the taxpayer-financed deal closes successfully.

On an affidavit filed with the , the state agency handling the purchase, U.S. Sugar listed 31 executives who stand to gain from the sale, among hundreds of others who own shares or otherwise hold stake in the company. Such affidavits are required under new rules passed in the wake of a scandal surrounding a recent, \$217 million deal to convert a rock mine into a reservoir.

The affidavits also require listing any 'success fees' to be paid to the individuals listed, should the deal go through. No success fees are listed for any of the names, including the 31 executives.

Coker declined to say whether executives stood to receive special compensation from within the company following completion of the deal. Instead, he said U.S. Sugar would disclose any bonuses

or success fees that are 'directly related to the transaction.' A spokesman for the , Gabe Margasak, said what is currently on file 'is to the best of our knowledge compliant with state statutes and our policies.'

Is Glades Restoration Project In Trouble?

01/08/2009

Miami New Times

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Starting today, the mayor, the governor and dozens of environmental activists are getting together at the Hilton to discuss the future of the Everglades, which is timely, since the state's proposal to buy \$1.34 billion of farmland from U.S. Sugar is now facing a legal challenge from rival Florida Crystals Corp.

If Florida Crystals succeeds in convincing a judge to kill the deal, the state would lose control of 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar land, which Gov. Charlie Crist has said he wants to use for Everglades restoration.

But is the deal the best use of taxpayer money? More after the jump.

Environmental groups seem to think the deal makes sense for taxpayers, but rivals of U.S. Sugar say otherwise. Gaston Cantens, a Crystals VP, recently told the Palm Beach Post that the billion dollar plan will effectively sap away money for other Everglades restoration projects already underway.

And Cantens isn't the only one who is upset. Small sugar growers say the deal is as much about big business as it is about the environment: under the deal U.S. Sugar is allowed to lease back the roughly 180,000 acres at a quarter of the market rate to keep farming for seven years, and maybe even longer if there are delays in getting restoration projects underway, giving U.S. Sugar a competitive edge over other sugar growers.

But environmentalists say what Florida Crystals really wants is to stop the plan so they can swoop in and buy the financially struggling U.S. Sugar.

At tomorrow's conference, high-level federal and state officials will talk about how restoration should proceed after the U.S. Sugar deal goes forward, if it does in fact go forward. Gov. Crist is the keynote speaker tomorrow night.

'While the deal is not perfect, perhaps the naysayers cannot see the forest for the trees,' Sara Fain, national co-chair of the Everglades Coalition, writes in a Sun-Sentinel editorial published today. 'The very ability to manage water -- provide drinking water, prevent flooding and maintain basic ecosystem functions-- is at stake, and the opportunities made possible with this land are key to long-term success or failure.'

'America's Everglades are suffering. Every day that we don't move

forward on restoration, this intricate ecosystem breaks down a little more.'

