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Sara Fain: Sugar deal renews hope for the Everglades

Sara Fain

My View

In recent weeks, we've seen plenty of criticism about the details of the proposed purchase by the South Florida Water Management District of 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land for the benefit of Everglades restoration.

While the deal is not perfect, perhaps the naysayers cannot see the forest for the trees. The very ability to manage water — provide drinking water, prevent flooding and maintain basic ecosystem functions in South Florida — is at stake, and the opportunities made possible by acquiring this land are the key to long-term success or failure.

There is no question that Florida's Everglades are suffering. Every day that we don't move forward on restoration, this intricate ecosystem breaks down a little more.

Over the recent years, South Florida suffered from one of the longest and worst droughts in its history. One result was a raging fire in eastern Everglades National Park, an area constantly starved for water. This fire burned almost 40,000 acres. Peat soil that took thousands of years to accumulate was lost in a single afternoon.

Yet, more recently, Water Conservation Area 3A, north of Everglades National Park, was drowning with dangerously high water levels. These unnatural extremes are devastating not only to the environment, but to our native wildlife, including the Florida panther, American crocodile, wood stork, snail kite, Cape Sable seaside sparrow and coral reefs.

The harm we have witnessed from either too much or not enough water in different parts of the Everglades ecosystem is a stark demonstration of the well-documented, fundamental flaws in our antiquated water management system.

According to a recent report by the National Research Council's Committee on Independent Scientific Review of Everglades Restoration Progress, if progress is not made soon on important restoration projects, the Everglades' continuing degradation may, at least in part, become irreversible.

The committee stated: "Ongoing delay in South Florida ecosystem restoration not only has postponed improvements to the hydrological condition but also has allowed ecological decline to continue. . . . Unless near-term progress is achieved on major restoration initiatives . . . the Everglades ecosystem may experience irreversible losses to its character and functioning."

Much has been stated about the high cost of this land purchase. Yet, little attention has been paid to the many benefits that will come from this important investment.

With more than 7 million people already living in South Florida, we've outgrown a water-management system built for fewer than 2 million residents. The new design takes the natural system into account and will be a tremendous improvement. And with the fortuitous U.S. Sugar land acquisition, we'll now have the acreage required to create reservoirs and treatment areas to restore clean water flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, reducing harmful discharges out to our sensitive estuaries.

Tourism will benefit

Millions travel from all over the world to visit the Everglades every year, filling hotels, rental cars, restaurants and other tourist attractions. Recreational use of natural areas and parks by both tourists and residents is one of the most important economic activities in Florida. Research shows that protected lands actually correlate more with greater economic growth than do lands utilized for natural resource exploitation.

Is \$1.3 billion too much to save a unique ecosystem that exists nowhere else in the world and has received international recognition for its incredible biodiversity? Is it too much to ensure that we have a clean water supply and economic development for future generations of South Floridians?

The Everglades Coalition of more than 6 million members believes it is not.

When President Truman dedicated Everglades National Park in 1947, he stated: "The benefits our nation will derive from this dedication will outlast the youngest of us. They will increase with the passage of years. Few actions could make a more lasting contribution to the enjoyment of the American people than the establishment of the Everglades National Park."

As Gov. Charlie Crist provides great leadership for the Everglades, we look to the 110th Congress and the Obama administration to renew its commitment to support and fund the restoration plan. Only with a strong federal-state partnership can we truly achieve our goals.

There's still plenty of work to be done to get there. During the 24th annual Everglades Coalition Conference in Miami on Jan. 9, a key session titled "Restoration after the Sugar Deal" will explore some of the issues we will face. Experts will discuss Everglades restoration as it pertains to growth management, political and public partnerships, endangered and invasive species, wildlife habitat, energy policies and water quality.

Additional Facts

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

- Sara Fain is national co-chair of the Everglades Coalition, which includes 51 allied environmental and conservation organizations. Contact her at sfain@npca.org. To learn more about the coalition, go to <http://www.evergladescoalition.org>.
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