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### Long-awaited Crist appointees join South Florida water board

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08/13/2009  
Sun Sentinel - West Palm Beach Bureau  
Reid, Andy

After a year of a growing number of empty seats, three new appointees Wednesday joined the board that oversees South Florida's water supply.

Long-standing vacancies left the board of the South Florida Water Management District shorthanded as the agency dealt with difficult issues – from drought to a blockbuster land deal.

The new board members sworn in Wednesday included:

- \*Joe Collins, 41, of Sebring, who works for Lykes Brothers, which has sugar, cattle and landscaping operations.
- \*Gladys Perez, 38, an attorney from Miami.
- \*Kevin Powers, 42, of Indiantown and a partner with Indiantown Realty.

"We have a full house," said Eric Buermann, chairman of the nine-member, volunteer board appointed by the governor. "We have been waiting."

Critics say Gov. Charlie Crist let vacancies linger to protect his proposal for the district to buy up U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland to use for Everglades restoration. The deal at one point stayed alive by just a one-vote margin.

Collins fills the seat that represents Glades communities that had objected to the land deal they said threatened the future of agriculture. The previous vacancy was created when former district board member Malcolm Wade Jr., a vice president at U.S. Sugar, resigned in June 2008 after Crist announced a plan to buy U.S. Sugar land to restore flows of water to the Everglades.

The latest version of the governor's plan calls for the district to pay \$536 million to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar, with an option to buy 107,000 acres more if the district can raise the money.

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## South Florida Water Management District finally has full board as three

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08/12/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

PAUL QUINLAN

WEST PALM BEACH — Gov. Charlie Crist's three new appointees to the governing board of South Florida's largest environmental agency were sworn in this afternoon.

The appointees mean that for the first time since June 2008, a full nine-member board presides over the South Florida Water Management District. The sprawling agency oversees the multibillion-dollar Everglades restoration effort for the state and manages water supply and flood control across 16 counties in Central and South Florida.

The appointees are:

Joe Collins, 41, a Sebring engineering manager with agricultural giant Lykes Bros. He takes the seat vacated in June 2008 by Malcolm "Bubba" Wade, a senior vice president at U.S. Sugar Corp.

Gladys Perez, 38, a Miami lawyer who worked as an assistant general counsel under Crist and former Gov. Jeb Bush. She succeeds Paul Huck Jr., a former top adviser to Crist, who resigned in March.

Kevin Powers, a partner in an Indiantown real estate firm. He succeeds Melissa Meeker, a Stuart environmental consultant, whose term expired in March.

Collins' appointment ends the long-running vacancy that angered those in the Glades who oppose Crist's \$536 million, 73,000-acre land deal with U.S. Sugar aimed at converting farmland to restored Everglades.

Glades residents complained that Crist's delay in naming Wade's replacement denied them representation when the board voted to approve the deal.

Board Chairman Eric Buermann, a Miami attorney, welcomed the new members just before a brief swearing-in.

"We've been waiting for new members, and we're just delighted that you were selected," Buermann said.

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## South Florida water managers agree to hold off on selling public land

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08/12/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

WEST PALM BEACH - Environmental concerns and questions about the transparency of real estate deals prompted South Florida water managers Wednesday to hold off on selling thousands of acres of taxpayer-owned land.

The South Florida Water Management District in June approved plans to unload 3,000 acres of "surplus" properties, even as it was pushing a half-billion-dollar deal to buy more land for water storage.

Environmentalists, led by Audubon of Florida, objected to the surplus sales and the district's board Wednesday agreed to a delay. Additionally, the district agreed to create a new public process for deciding how to dispose of land the agency contends it no longer needs.

More sales of surplus land are expected as the district embarks on its proposed 73,000-acre purchase from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration.

The U.S. Sugar farmland would be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas, but those projects have yet to be designed. After designs are complete portions of property may not be needed and should be sold to recoup costs, said Ruth Clements, agency director of land acquisition and management.

The initial 3,000 acres of "surplus" properties, spread from north of the lake down to Palm Beach County, once were intended for water storage and treatment efforts, but no longer fit into the district's plans, Clements said.

Proceeds from selling surplus land could be used to buy more land or help pay for a backlog of environmental restoration projects.

The district paid about \$26 million for the collection of properties and estimates it could make about \$30 million to \$40 million by selling the land.

"It can be put back on the tax rolls and used," Clements said.

The district manages water supplies from Orlando to the Keys and owns 1.3 million acres across South Florida.

The proposed deal with U.S. Sugar calls for the agency to purchase 73,000 acres for \$536 million. It includes an option to buy another 107,000 acres if the district can raise the money. If the initial deal closes as scheduled in 2010, the U.S. Sugar land would be used to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades.

As the district's land holdings expand, the agency now plans to start a periodic review of its land holdings to look for properties it no longer needs and can be sold.

The district Wednesday agreed to hold a public workshop with its Water Resources Advisory Commission to come up with recommendations for how to identify and dispose of surplus land. Those proposals would go before the district's governing board for, appointed by the governor, for approval.

The district's board also would have to approve all land sales.

"Once you get rid of it, it's gone forever," District Chairman Eric Buermann said. "It should require greater scrutiny by the board."

Audubon's Jacquie Weisblum said the district needs a "transparent public process" for handling surplus land to ensure that environmental restoration efforts are not diminished.

One of the smallest, but potentially most valuable, properties on the surplus list is 3 acres in Palm Beach County near the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge west of Wellington. While the district owns the refuge, the agency determined it couldn't incorporate the 3 acres because it is separated from the refuge by a canal.

The land on the surplus list include two 1,000-acre properties, one north of Lake Okeechobee and the other near Indiantown in Martin County, once planned for water storage.

District officials initially said they dropped those plans for the properties because the land was within 2 miles of small airports and the Federal Aviation Administration recommended against building bird-attracting water control structures near runways.

One Wednesday, Clements said the airport concerns were a factor, but that new designs for water storage and treatment areas made the land unnecessary for the projects.

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## Court decision crucial for funding U.S. Sugar land purchase

08/12/2009

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CaptivaSanibel.com

Much is at stake for those of us who live near the Caloosahatchee and indeed, throughout Southwest Florida - as a circuit court judge decides whether to validate a \$536 million bond issue for the U.S. Sugar land acquisition that will clear the way for an ambitious plan to restore historic Lake Okeechobee water flow to the south.

With the advantage of hindsight, it's apparent that man's efforts to "re-engineer" Florida's natural water management system nearly 130 years ago brought a host of unintended consequences, leading to the significant water management and water quality issues we face today.

Before 1880, the Caloosahatchee River and estuary were freestanding systems, unaffected by Lake Okeechobee except during periods of very heavy rainfall.

Fast-forward to the present day, and the results of human tinkering with Lake O are all too evident. Last summer Tropical Storm Fay inundated the lake's watershed with a record 40 inches in 17 days.

During the rainy 2004-2005 hurricane season, water containing 900 metric tons of phosphorus more than six times the established target for a healthy lake wound up in Lake O. Ensuing releases from the lake sometimes over 8,000 cubic feet per second wrought havoc in the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, killing fish, oysters, clams and blue crabs while also stimulating a proliferation of unwanted and harmful algal blooms.

Visitors our region's bread and butter stayed away in droves as national news organizations reported on once pristine Southwest Florida beaches fouled by stacks of algae and fish corpses.

Without increased water storage capacity and a restoration of the flow-way south to the Everglades and Florida Bay, this drought and deluge cycle will continue, with devastating consequences for our local waterways, wildlife, habitat and economy.

The Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation has long advocated in concert with partners in the Everglades Coalition and Everglades Foundation in support of this vital restoration. In recent years, SCCF has contributed another significant element to the stakeholder process: scientific data.

SCCF's River, Estuary and Coastal Observing Network (RECON) is a network of sensors deployed throughout the Caloosahatchee River and estuary providing real-time water quality measurements. Since 2007, RECON has allowed SCCF Marine Laboratory scientists to connect the dots between Lake Okeechobee releases and water quality events in our region.

The acquisition of 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land is a critical first step to address the unintended consequences of an outdated water management strategy begun more than a century ago. The deal represents our best opportunity for beginning to recreate a water storage mechanism and water flow that mimics the functions provided by the historic River of Grass.

Failure to complete the U.S. Sugar land acquisition would jeopardize the health of the Caloosahatchee watershed and put our region's fresh water supply as well as our tourism-based economy at grave risk. For our region, the cost of failure to act on this unique opportunity is simply too great.

The bond hearing to finance the state's purchase of U.S. Sugar land was completed this week and an order from the circuit court judge is expected in the next two weeks. If the bonds are approved it is expected that the opponents who brought the suit, Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Indian tribe, will appeal to the Florida Supreme Court. The closing on the U.S. Sugar land, once planned for this September, is now scheduled for next March.

Further delays in the process will only push the cost of future phases of Everglades restoration higher an increase that will be borne by taxpayers. We urge the residents of Southwest Florida and our regional elected officials to support completion of the U.S. Sugar land acquisition without further delay.

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## Some South Florida growers failing to meet pollution standards intended to protect Everglades

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08/12/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

WEST PALM BEACH - Farmers produced mixed results this year meeting pollution-reduction requirements for water headed to the Everglades.

Florida's Everglades Forever Act calls for sugar cane, citrus and other growers south of Lake Okeechobee to limit the amount of damaging phosphorus that washes off agricultural land in stormwater that flows to the Everglades.

Growers in the Everglades Agricultural Area, the region directly south and southeast of the lake, met their requirement to reduce phosphorus levels at least 25 percent, according to the annual review by the South Florida Water Management District.

But agricultural land in the region southwest of the lake, known as the C-139 drainage basin, failed to meet phosphorus limits. Those lesser standards require the region to maintain the historic level of phosphorus in stormwater runoff.

Instead, the C-139 region more than doubled the top target range for phosphorus levels, according to Pam Wade, of the district's Everglades Regulation Department.

An influx of phosphorus, found in fertilizer, fuels the growth of cattails, which crowds out other plants and damages the Everglades ecosystem.

To reduce pollution, the state requires farming practices on 670,000 acres of agricultural land intended to limit the amount of phosphorus that flows south. Those methods include fertilizer management, sediment controls and water retention.

Exceeding the state phosphorus standards can trigger requirements for more limits on farming practices.

The state needs to "tighten" its requirements and encourage growers to reduce the reliance on chemicals, said Drew Martin, of the Sierra Club.

The types of farming, more intense land uses and differing rainfall patterns are among the reasons the C-139 region has trouble meeting its phosphorus standards, Wade said.

The water that flows off agricultural land south of the lake gets directed to pollution-filtering, manmade marshes intended to absorb phosphorus before the water reaches the Everglades. Those stormwater treatment areas have so far failed to consistently reach long-term phosphorus reduction goals.

Phosphorus-laden stormwater that drains into Lake Okeechobee worsens the Everglades' phosphorus problems. South Florida growers tap the lake for irrigation and the phosphorus keeps moving south.

The water management district's proposed \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration should help combat the infusion of phosphorus, district Executive Director Carol Wehle said.

The pending deal includes citrus land in the C-139 basin that could be used to expand water storage and treatment. The goal is to "control the volume and velocity of the water," Wehle said.

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