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Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
New Deal May Save the Everglades - and a Sugar Firm	03/09/2010	Mother Nature Network	Katherine Butler
2010 Legislative Summary	03/09/2010	Tallahassee Democrat	
Gov Crist responds to Everglades land deal critics	03/09/2010	News Press - Online	
Crist defends Glades deal	03/09/2010	Tallahassee Democrat -- Online	Jim Ash
2010 Legislature summary	03/09/2010	Tallahassee Democrat -- Online	
The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board faces a defining vote	03/09/2010	Palm Beach Post	
TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2010	03/09/2010	Florida Trend	Matt Nelson
Consultant Questions Viability of U.S. Sugar Deal	03/09/2010	Food Manufacturing	
Sugar deal sparks call for oversight	03/09/2010	Miami Herald - Online, The	MICHAEL PELTIER
E2 Round-up: Big sugar wins big in Everglades deal, conservatives keep Gore in the crosshairs, and m	03/08/2010	Hill, The	Ben Geman
In Deal on Everglades, a Dream Is Deferred	03/08/2010	Ledger - Online, The	
Financial adviser says Everglades purchase could sink Fla. water agency	03/08/2010	McClatchy Company Washington DC Bureau	Washington Rep. Adam Smith
Crist stands by U.S. Sugar Corp. deal	03/08/2010	Florida Today - Online	JIM ASH
Yet Another Jeb Bush Dig at Charlie Crist	03/08/2010	Newsweek - Online	

Crist answers critics of land deal	03/08/2010	Pensacola News Journal - Online
Rubio smacks Crist on Everglades deal	03/08/2010	St. Petersburg Times - Online
Grandiose plan to rescue Everglades, help St. Lucie River teeters on the edge	03/08/2010	TCPalm.com
CHANNEL 5 NEWS 2010-03-08 05:34:54	03/08/2010	WPTV-TV

New Deal May Save the Everglades - and a Sugar Firm

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Mother Nature Network
Katherine Butler

Gov. Charlie Crist's $1.75 billion plan to save the Everglades now aids United States Sugar.

In June of 2008, Gov. Charlie Christ proposed that Florida save the Everglades by buying out its major landowner, United States Sugar. Crist claimed this move would be remembered as monumental as the creation of the nation's first national park, Yellowstone. But now, the New York Times reports that Christ's plan will focus more on saving on United States Sugar and not the famous wetlands.

The Everglades are subtropical wetlands that make up much of southern Florida. They are part of a complex system of interdependent ecosystems of cypress swamps and mangrove forests. It is home to several endangered plants and animals, including alligator, sea turtles, manatees, hardwood hammock trees and more. After a century of urban growth, dredging and drainage, preservationists have worked to find a deal that would ensure the survival of what is called a "river of grass."

Many thought this deal came in 2008, when the state of Florida proposed to buy swaths of land from U.S. Sugar. June 2008, Mr. Crist said to the public, "I can envision no better gift to the Everglades, the people of Florida and the people of America — as well as our planet — than to place in public ownership this missing link that represents the key to true restoration." The area, which includes 187,000 acres of land, would then be rehabilitated. As the NY Times reports, this came at a convenient time for the privately held U.S. Sugar, which was more than $500 million in debt by late 2007.

Hopes that this deal would preserve the Everglades, which are dying due to a lack of clean water. The NY Times reports that 49,000 acres of the United States Sugar land was contaminated with high levels of copper, DDT, selenium and other chemicals. Arsenic is also shown to exist at high levels.

But then the Recession hit. By April 2009, the state downgraded its purchase of 72,800 acres of United States Sugar's land at the reduced price of $536 million. The state planned to possibly buy the remaining 107,000 acres at a future date.

And now the original plan to preserve has been edited down once again. On March 31, a new deal will close that has the state buying 72,800 acres from U.S. Sugar for $536 million. This will eradicate the once-struggling company's financial woes. Further, United States Sugar will continue to farm the land for the next seven years.

Still, many environmentalists feel this new deal offers the Everglades its best hope. The NY Times reports that criticism has remained muted as most environmentalists, "do not want to say anything that might help kill what would be the largest land purchase ever for the Everglades."

2010 Legislative Summary

03/09/2010
Tallahassee Democrat

Return to Top

The Florida Legislature is in session through April 30. The key issues yesterday and what's coming up:

Revenue

What's happening: Lawmakers and the governor get an updated prediction on state revenues today, a key to building the state's spending plan. For the first time in three years, previous projections include about $2 billion more coming in this year.

What's next: If projections falter, a $3 billion-plus shortfall from higher costs will get wider.

Insurance

What's happening: Insurance regulators propose stricter measures to validate hurricane mitigation for homeowners insurance discounts -- things like photos to document efforts to strengthen homes against hurricane winds.

What's next: The Cabinet is set to vote today.

Everglades

What happened: The New York Times reported Everglades restoration efforts led by Gov. Charlie Crist benefit U.S. Sugar Corp. with high land prices that could saddle taxpayers with hundreds of millions of dollars of inflated sales price and slow down environmental work.

What's next: Crist says he's still behind the plan.

Sunshine

What's happening: A Senate committee will give a first hearing to a bill by Sen. Paula Dockery that implements many of the recommendations of the Governor's Commission on Open Government. Among other things, it required open-government training for public officials and prohibits government from charging for records that take a short time to prepare.

What's next: A companion bill sponsored by Rep. Clay Ford, a Gulf Breeze Republican, is in the House.

Gov Crist responds to Everglades land deal critics

03/09/2010
News Press - Online

Return to Top

Jim Ash The News-Press Capital Bureau Chief March 8, 2010

Watchdog blog: New York Times story about Everglades deal takes shots at Crist

2:55 P.M. — TALLAHASSEE -- Gov. Charlie Crist fired back today at critics who pummeled him for a $536 million Everglades land deal that they describe as a giveaway to U.S. Sugar Corp.

Crist said the criticism came from Florida Crystals, a business competitor of U.S. Sugar and a supporter of the governor's political foe, Marco Rubio.

In an editorial board meeting at the Tallahassee Democrat, Crist was asked about a Sunday story in The New York Times that showed the deal could put the state on the hook for $400 million in inflated land prices and that Everglades restoration could be delayed a generation.

In the article, former Gov. Jeb Bush panned the deal.

On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy, Bush was quoted as saying.

Crist said he has no qualms and is still a big supporter of the deal.

Absolutely. Without a doubt, Crist said. It s easy to criticize a difficult effort.

Crist said U.S. Sugar did not have an unfair advantage because his former chief of staff worked for the law firm that represents U.S. Sugar. The deal was also criticized by U.S. Sugar competitor, Florida Crystals, a big supporter of Crist s opponent in the Republican race for the U.S. Senate, Marco Rubio.

They (U.S. Sugar) had a stronger voice because they are a willing seller. That s it. It s that simple, Crist said of U.S. Sugar. So Florida Crystals criticizes it because they were not a willing seller. I know what drives some arguments sometimes. I m not stupid.

Rubio s response, in a written statement.

This deal is nothing more than a massive taxpayer-funded bailout for a top Charlie Crist campaign donor and a profitable bonanza for Crist s inner circle.

Crist defends Glades deal

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Tallahassee Democrat -- Online
Jim Ash

'It's easy to criticize a difficult effort,' governor says

Gov. Charlie Crist fired back Monday at critics who pummeled him for a $536 million Everglades land deal that they describe as a giveaway to U.S. Sugar Corp.

In an editorial board meeting with the Tallahassee Democrat, Crist was asked about a New York Times investigation that showed the deal could put the state on the hook for $400 million in inflated land prices and that Everglades restoration could be delayed a generation.

In the article, former Gov. Jeb Bush panned the deal.

"On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy," Bush was quoted as saying.

Crist said he's still behind the deal to put control of more than 100,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land in state hands and help in ongoing efforts to return the Everglades to its natural flow. He said it's still a landmark deal and good for the environment.

"Absolutely. Without a doubt," Crist said. "It's easy to criticize a difficult effort."

Crist said U.S. Sugar did not have an unfair advantage because his former chief of staff worked for the law firm that represents U.S. Sugar. The deal was also criticized by U.S. Sugar competitor, Florida Crystals, a big supporter of Crist's opponent in the Republican race for the U.S. Senate, Marco Rubio.

"They (U.S. Sugar) had a stronger voice because they are a willing seller. That's it. It's that simple," Crist said. "So Florida Crystals criticizes it because they were not a willing seller. I know what drives some arguments sometimes. I'm not stupid."

Rubio has overcome a 30-point deficit in the polls to take the lead in the GOP primary. Crist hammered the former House speaker for his use of a Republican Party of Florida credit card.

Records leaked to reporters show that Rubio put thousands of dollars in personal expenses on the party-issued card, money that Rubio paid back.

"Of late, my opponent has proven, because of good reporting, frankly, that he can't be trusted with other people's money," Crist said.

(2 of 2)

"People recognize desperation in bringing up how Marco Rubio spent his own money," said Rubio spokesman Alex Burgos. "Floridians know they can't trust Charlie Crist with taxpayers' money."

Legislators have expressed a distrust of Crist's state-spending proposals. House and Senate leaders are skeptical of Crist's sunny budget outlook.

Crist unveiled a $69.2 billion budget proposal earlier this year that counts on $1.1 billion in federal Medicaid money that has yet to materialize, another $1 billion in federal education dollars that is still in doubt and more than $400 million from an expanded gambling deal with the Seminole Tribe of Florida that the Legislature has so far rejected.

Last week, the federal government announced that Florida made the first cut for Race-to-the-Top education grants and is now competing with just 16 other states. Also last week, House negotiators reopened talks with the Seminoles.

Crist said he would resubmit a more austere spending plan if the federal money doesn't come. Crist did not include raises for state employees in his January budget, but unlike the Legislature, he did not call for hiking their health insurance premiums and lowering state contributions to the pension plan. He acknowledged that might have to change.

"Those are some things we'll look at, I'm sure," he said.

2010 Legislature summary

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Tallahassee Democrat -- Online
LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

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The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board faces a defining vote

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Palm Beach Post
Letter to the Editor

The South Florida Water Management District Governing Board faces a defining vote at its meeting this week, one that could bring the agency to the fiscal brink and force an increase in property taxes for homeowners in the 16 counties that make up the district.

Two weeks ago, the district's financial adviser gave the agency a dire forecast if it proceeds with the planned purchase of land owned by U.S. Sugar, which, despite what you've heard, would do little to advance the important goal of Everglades restoration. Still, the board appears determined to approve this sweetheart deal, no matter that the purchase would create operating deficits of $89 million and $110 million in each of the next two years.

The board's financial adviser says significant cuts will be needed in the operations and maintenance budgets for current projects essential to the district's mission. To make ends meet, the board will likely have to raise property taxes. No matter the red flags, the district's unelected board is stacked to approve this deal, which was negotiated in secret by big-money special interests in Tallahassee.

Last week, in making two new appointments to the South Florida Water Management District board, Gov. Crist told the St. Petersburg Times that he applied a "litmus test:" assurance that the new members would vote to approve the purchase. Predictably, both new members are on record as supporting the deal.

As I've said from the start, the U.S. Sugar deal represents bad public policy. I was the sponsor of the bill to authorize bond sales for Everglades restoration, as well as legislation that created the Florida Forever land preservation program. But if completed, the U.S. Sugar purchase will swallow the district's budget for years, and prevent progress on other water-supply measures identified as priorities, including the reservoir, pollution-treatment marshes and flood-control protections around Lake Okeechobee.

So, while this project is being sold as Everglades restoration, it would delay actual restoration efforts by using needed money for land acquisition, while U.S. Sugar would retain the more significant tracts in the natural flow-way. Making matters worse, the deal would give U.S. Sugar an exclusive right to lease back the acreage at below-market rates for 20 years.

I'm asking board Chairman Eric Buermann to be forthcoming about the consequences, including tax increases that will be needed and opportunities that will be lost. Continuing to pursue this purchase is not just fiscally irresponsible; it is nothing short of reckless.

SEN. PAULA DOCKERY

Lakeland

Editor's note: Paula Dockery represents Florida Senate District 15. She is a Republican candidate for governor.

TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2010

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Florida Trend
Matt Nelson

Tuesday's Top Stories

What You Need to Know About Florida Today

GAINESVILLE:

UF's Sumi Helal envisions technology everywhere, stitched into everyday life as invisible as the weave of a fine suit. Read on ... [

Source: Florida Trend]

Also:

Florida needs chic to attract geeks, entrepreneurs say [Post]

MELBOURNE:

Northrop Grumman Drops Tanker Bid Hurting Fla. Jobs

Northrop Grumman Corp. said Monday it won't bid on a contract to build the U.S. military's next-generation tanker aircraft, apparently wiping out a planned expansion that would have created almost 1,700 jobs statewide, including 500 in Melbourne. Los Angeles-based Northrop said it would take a pass on competing again for one of the richest defense contracts in history, accusing the Air Force of setting biased ground rules that give a prohibitive edge to its rival, Boeing Co. [Source: Orlando Sentinel]

STATEWIDE:

Community Colleges Face Crunch, Can't Meet Student Demand

Now the colleges are waiting to see whether state lawmakers will give them the money they want — about $70 million on top of their more than $1 billion state allocation — to accommodate more students, because fast growth is expected to continue through fall. If the schools don't get the cash bump and their allocation is slashed, more students may find themselves unable to create a full class schedule and face possible delays in graduation. [

Source: Orlando Sentinel]

SARASOTA:

Luxury Home Sales May Signal Resurgence

While the Commerce Department reported late last month that sales of new homes plunged to a record low in January, there are rumblings that the market for new, luxury homes in Southwest Florida is starting to awaken. [Source: Herald-Tribune]

Also in real estate:

Lee County Realtors expect April rush as tax credit set to expire [News-Press]

ALSO AROUND FLORIDA:

› Slow, Steady Growth Paying Off for Darden [Sentinel]

Like the tortoise in Aesop's fable, Orlando-based Darden Restaurants for several years has taken a slow, steady approach to opening new Olive Gardens and Red Lobsters as its competitors built at the frenzied pace of the hare. Also: Ruth's Chris staff drops

› Nelson Hopes Obama Clarifies Space Vision [Today]

At his Florida space summit next month, President Barack Obama should add one more shuttle mission and announce a heavy-lift rocket development test program that could save 1,500 to 2,000 Kennedy Space Center jobs, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson said Monday.

› 2.5 Million Floridians on Food Stamps [Sun Sentinel]

More than one out of every eight residents, 13.6% of the population, rely on the program to help put food on the table. And that number has been growing steadily for almost three years. Related: Office that handles jobless benefits in Florida not meeting standardssmall biz adviceBeing a Great Role Model [Florida Trend]

Employees will follow bad behavior from the boss.› State Report Raises Doubts About Renewable Energy Goals [Fla. Tribune]

The Legislature in 2008 adopted a comprehensive energy bill that directed state agencies to study the economic effects of providing financial incentives for biomass energy production from trees or waste wood."

› SeaWorld, Trainer's Family Seek to Prevent Release of Video of Fatal Killer-Whale Accident [Sentinel]

› Sarasota Pursues a Google Future [Herald-Tribune]

On Feb. 10, the kingpin of search engine providers announced it would entertain applications from communities wishing to become part of an experimental ultra-high-speed Internet network operating at roughly 100 times faster than what most Americans have access to today -- one gigabit per second to a desktop at home or at work.

› Crist Defends Glades Deal [Tallahassee Democrat]

Gov. Charlie Crist fired back Monday at critics who pummeled him for a $536 million Everglades land deal that they describe as a giveaway to U.S. Sugar Corp. NY Times: Deal to save Everglades may help sugar firm

› Jackson South Hospital Could Be Multimillion-Dollar White Elephant [Herald]

Of all the proposed cuts announced last week for the Jackson Health System, the one with the biggest implications is closing down Jackson South, where a $102-million, four-story addition is 40% complete.

commentary

State Must Count on Illegals in Census [Post column]

Dan Moffett: Every politician in the state welcomes the 2010 Census because the new numbers could bring Florida more federal money and another seat in Congress. Where it gets sticky is taking a position on whom the government's counters should count.

Go to page 2 for more stories ...

Consultant Questions Viability of U.S. Sugar Deal

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Food Manufacturing

A state financial consultant is questioning whether Florida's multimillion-dollar plan to buy land from U.S. Sugar Corp. for Everglades restoration remains affordable.

In a Feb. 17 letter to the South Florida Water Management District's chief financial officer, the consultant warns the district has difficult "financial decisions." He says projections show deficits in 2011 and 2012 of $89 million and $110 million, respectively, if the sugar deal goes through.

The deal is set to go before the Florida Supreme Court next month after opponents argued the $536 million plan to buy 73,000 acres of farmland is an irresponsible use of taxpayer dollars.

The district overseas Everglades restoration and flood control in South Florida. The agency says it is reviewing options.

Sugar deal sparks call for oversight

Return to Top

03/09/2010
Miami Herald - Online, The
MICHAEL PELTIER
Posted on Tuesday, 03.09.10

LEGISLATURE

Florida's Everglades deal with the sugar industry is sparking calls for legislation that would require approval before water management districts could make large land purchases.

News Service of Florida

TALLAHASSEE -- With lawmakers already frustrated over a lack of oversight, recent reports on the state's landmark $536 million Everglades agreement with U.S. Sugar Corp. may add momentum for a legislative response in an attempt to prevent a repeat of the controversial deal, a key House lawmaker said Monday.

Meanwhile, a scheduled meeting of the South Florida Water Management District's Board this week to extend the closing deadline for the contract that ends March 31 is also likely to provide a venue for renewed scrutiny of the May 2009 agreement for the district to purchase nearly 73,000 acres from the sugar company.

Rep. Trudi Williams, R-Fort Myers and chairwoman of the House Agricultural and Natural Resources Policy Committee, told The News Service of Florida Monday that she will attempt to craft a committee proposal by merging three similar House bills that would require legislative approval before water management districts could make large land purchases in the future.

A vocal critic of the deal penned last year, Williams said the legislation is necessary to ensure that future legislators won't have to merely sit back and watch the water management district board, the members of which are appointed by the governor. As for the U.S. Sugar deal, however, Williams said the Legislature's hands may be tied. ``I don't know any vehicle for the Legislature to intervene right now,'' Williams said. ``If I had a vehicle, I would certainly try to exercise it.''

Backers say the purchase is critical for Everglades restoration efforts. Critics, meanwhile, characterize it as a sweetheart deal for an otherwise financially strapped company and the law firm that represents it.

The deal originally called for the taxpayers in the water management taxing district's 16-county area across South Florida to spend $1.75 billion for 187,000 acres, about 300 square miles. Facing tough financial times, though, the agreement was renegotiated. If approved, the state will have the option to purchase an additional 107,000 acres.

Recent articles in The Miami Herald and a weekend piece by The New York Times have reignited debate over the already controversial transaction, potentially the most expensive land purchase in state history. Among the questions raised were the parcel's appraised value, environmental quality and location of lands slated for purchase. The land being bought was appraised during the height of the speculation boom, but land values have since plummeted. Yet the agreement is still based on the higher values, The Times reported. Appraisals on the original $1.75 billion purchase had fallen by $400 million.

Also at issue is the district's ability to pay. The purchase is being paid by property taxes, collections of which have fallen with property values. The tax base has fallen from $549 million in 2008 to an estimated $405 million 2011. The drop in tax base has raised concerns that the district can no longer afford such a pricey item.

On Monday, the chairman of the joint legislative panel overseeing Everglades issues tried to dispel rumors that the district would be on the hook for the purchase even if it couldn't meet its other obligations. The contract, he said, gives the district an easy out.

``We want it to be very clear, if the money is there you can go forward, if not, the deal's off,'' said Rep. Julio Robaina, R-Miami and chairman of the Joint Legislative Committee on Everglades Oversight.

The Florida Supreme Court has scheduled oral argument for April 7 to determine if the water management district is justified in selling $534 million in bonds to pay for the purchase. It's historically a limited review.

The water management governing board is meeting Wednesday to extend the contract that otherwise would expire March 31.

E2 Round-up: Big sugar wins big in Everglades deal, conservatives keep Gore in the crosshairs, and m

Return to Top

03/08/2010
Hill, The
Ben Geman
- 03/08/10 06:50 AM ET

The New York Times looks deeply into a much-heralded Everglades restoration deal – and finds a clear win for big sugar while the eco-payoff is uncertain.

Gov. Charlie Crist (R) announced plans in 2008 for a massive buyout of United States Sugar in order to restore the unique but badly damaged ecosystem.

"Nearly two years later, the governor's ambitious plan to reclaim the river of grass, as the famed wetlands are known, is instead on track to rescue the fortunes of United States Sugar," the story finds. It says the company was in the driver's seat from the start, and that state officials made deals that ran counter to the immediate needs of the Everglades.

"Efforts to restore the Everglades have picked up urgency in the last decade: the sprawling subtropical wetland, the only ecosystem of its kind, is dying for lack of clean water. Many environmentalists remain convinced that Mr. Crist's deal with United States Sugar, even in its downsized form, offers the Everglades its best hope. But documents and interviews suggest that the price tag and terms of the deal could set back Everglades restoration for years, or even decades," the Times alleges.

Preventing the plundering of ecosystems is a major theme of the movie smash "Avatar." It didn't win best picture at Sunday's Oscar ceremonies, but environmentalists see it as the best chance in years to use a pop culture juggernaut for green ends.

Time magazine's Bryan Walsh examines efforts by environmental groups to link Avatar to issues like oil sands development in Canada. Avatar's green tint has also received plenty of attention on environmental blogs like Climate Progress.

Director James Cameron himself has strongly emphasized the film's eco-themes and called for stepped-up efforts on climate change. Both Cameron and Al Gore are slated to appear at the International Sustainability Forum in Brazil later this month.

Speaking of Gore, he's illustrated on the cover (not in a flattering way) of the current issues of two conservative magazines: The Weekly Standard and the National Review, which both have pieces that go after the climate movement.

The Standard's Steven Hayward explores what he calls "body blows to the climate campaign" inflicted by the hacked climate science emails and problems with the landmark 2007 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

In France, meanwhile, President Nicolas Sarkozy is calling for international development banks to finance nuclear power projects in developing countries, Reuters reports.

"Sarkozy said the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and other such institutions should make a 'wholehearted commitment' to fund civilian nuclear energy programmes," their story states.

"It is a scandal that international organisations today do not finance nuclear projects," he said at a nuclear energy conference. "The current situation means that countries are condemned to rely on more costly energy that causes greater pollution."

http://thehill.com/blogs/e2-wire/677-e2-wire/85385-e2-round-up-big-sugar-wins-big-in-everglades-deal-conservatives-keep-gore-in-the-crosshairs-and-more-on-avatars-green-dividend

In Deal on Everglades, a Dream Is Deferred

Return to Top

03/08/2010
Ledger - Online, The

DON VAN NATTA Jr. and DAMIEN CAVE

When Gov. Charlie Crist announced Florida's $1.75 billion plan to save the Everglades by buying out a major landowner, United States Sugar, he declared that the deal would be remembered as a public acquisition "as monumental as the creation of the nation's first national park, Yellowstone."

FIELDS OF CANE United States Sugar's Clewiston sugar cane refinery. A $1.75 billion deal to sell land and assets to Florida was reduced to 72,800 acres, in separate parcels, for $536 million.

Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Standing amid the marshes at the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge in June 2008, Mr. Crist said, "I can envision no better gift to the Everglades, the people of Florida and the people of America — as well as our planet — than to place in public ownership this missing link that represents the key to true restoration."

Nearly two years later, the governor's ambitious plan to reclaim the river of grass, as the famed wetlands are known, is instead on track to rescue the fortunes of United States Sugar.

The proposal was downsized only five months after it was announced. By April 2009, amid the deepening recession, the state said it could afford to purchase only 72,800 acres of United States Sugar's land, for $536 million. The company would stay in business and the state would retain the option of buying the remaining 107,000 acres at a future date.

United States Sugar dictated many of the terms of the deal as state officials repeatedly made decisions against the immediate needs of the Everglades and the interests of taxpayers, an examination of thousands of state e-mail messages and records and more than 60 interviews showed.

Efforts to restore the Everglades have picked up urgency in the last decade: the sprawling subtropical wetland, the only ecosystem of its kind, is dying for lack of clean water. Many environmentalists remain convinced that Mr. Crist's deal with United States Sugar, even in its downsized form, offers the Everglades its best hope.

But documents and interviews suggest that the price tag and terms of the deal could set back Everglades restoration for years, or even decades.

Negotiations favored United States Sugar from the start, when the state accepted two outside firms' appraisals of the company's land that used figures from the height of the real estate market, according to documents.

When a "fairness opinion" commissioned by the state found that those appraisals had overvalued the land by $400 million, Florida officials orchestrated a public relations campaign to discredit the findings, internal e-mail showed. Appraisers from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which was required to sign off on the deal, were also cut out of the process after raising concerns, e-mail messages showed.

When it came time to decide which land to buy, state officials acknowledged that United States Sugar was, as one official put it during an interview, "pretty much in the driver's seat." The water district overseeing the restoration will end up with six large disconnected parcels under the current deal, including all of United States Sugar's citrus groves.

State officials acknowledged that some of that land, which has been ravaged by canker, a plant disease, is useless for restoration.

The officials defended the negotiations as appropriate, saying that United States Sugar needed certain tracts of farmland to continue operating.

Mr. Crist said in an interview that officials had "negotiated to try to get the very best deal we could." He added, "We have a duty and a responsibility as good stewards to understand that we may never have this opportunity again, ever, ever."

Supporters of the plan said the land would enable the state and federal government to build reservoirs and water

treatment systems. But doing so would require deep financial reserves from the South Florida Water Management District, which oversees restoration and is financed by taxpayers in 16 counties. Internal district documents put the price tag at up to $12 billion and projected that the district would have nowhere near that amount.

In the meantime, more than a dozen projects under way as part of a 10-year-old federal and district restoration effort have been suspended or canceled in anticipation of the cost of the United States Sugar deal. Among them is a massive reservoir in western Palm Beach County that was seen as a major step toward restoration of the Everglades. In total, $1.3 billion had already been spent on the projects, according to an internal water district document.

Former Gov. Jeb Bush, who initiated most of that work, said in an interview that he was "deeply disappointed" with the decision by Mr. Crist, his successor and a fellow Republican, calling the move to halt the projects a setback for restoration.

"To replace projects that were under way for a possibility of a project decades from now is not a good trade," Mr. Bush said. "On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy."

In its current form, the deal's only clear, immediate beneficiaries would be United States Sugar, a privately held company based in Clewiston, Fla., and its law firm, Gunster, which is expected to collect tens of millions of dollars in fees for its work on the sale, according to current and former United States Sugar executives.

The sale, scheduled to close March 31, amounts to a lifeline for the company, which entered negotiations at a time of profound weakness; it was facing a costly shareholder lawsuit, sinking profit margins and increased foreign competition. The deal would enable it to wipe nearly all the debt from its books.

United States Sugar had an unusually powerful advocate in Gunster, a West Palm Beach law firm that had represented it since 1990. Gunster's chairman, George LeMieux, was Governor Crist's chief of staff when the deal was first conceived. Mr. LeMieux, who began working at the law firm in 1994, returned to it in January 2008 as the deal was being renegotiated.

He and Mr. Crist are confidants, and the governor referred to Mr. LeMieux as the "maestro" of his 2006 election victory. When a United States Senate seat was vacated in 2009, Mr. Crist appointed Mr. LeMieux to fill it. The governor is now campaigning for that post and has often described the United States Sugar purchase as a crowning achievement of his administration.

Mr. LeMieux said in an interview that he had recused himself from the United States Sugar negotiations while he was chief of staff, to avoid a conflict of interest. He said he had never discussed the deal with Mr. Crist, which was "awkward as heck," given how close they are.

Back at the law firm, Mr. LeMieux sent an e-mail message on Dec. 18, 2008, to its compensation committee, saying "I should not be compensated" for the firm's United States Sugar representation, according to a copy of the message. H. William Perry, Gunster's managing partner, said the firm complied. Mr. LeMieux said that he had only "management type discussions" about the case as chairman.

Rick J. Burgess, a Gunster partner, said he spoke to Mr. LeMieux on occasion about the deal, using him "as a sounding board."

Mr. LeMieux played a similar role for Kirk Fordham, who runs the powerful Everglades Foundation. Mr. Fordham said he spoke two or three times with Mr. LeMieux when he was at the law firm for updates about the negotiations.

For United States Sugar, "it's a fantastic deal," said a former senior executive of the company, who described his colleagues as "elated."

"I won't lie to you — it's a damn good price for that land," said the executive, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he had signed a nondisclosure agreement. "But it's not as good a deal for the Everglades. If the district doesn't have any money after this purchase, then they won't be able to do any restoration projects. It could be a disaster in the making."

A Governor's Overture

On Route 27 heading out of Palm Beach, towering piles of rocks extend for more than a mile on the site of what was to become the largest man-made reservoir on the planet. Consuming more than 16,000 acres, it would hold enough water to fill 100,000 Olympic-size swimming pools.

The reservoir was a vital piece of the $7.8 billion restoration project put together by President Bill Clinton in 2000. Under the plan, reservoirs, marshes and hundreds of wells would collect, clean and deliver rainwater to the Everglades, where an array of plants and animals are threatened with extinction.

Environmentalists had long sought to restore the historic flow way, or waterway, from Lake Okeechobee south through the glades and into Florida Bay, a dream that had been hampered by more than a century of piping, dredging and development. The flow way required land owned by United States Sugar and its chief competitor, Florida Crystals, both of which refused to sell for years.

The system of wells and reservoirs was a way to circumvent that need. Like many previous restoration efforts, though, the Clinton plan hit obstacles, including competing local interests and insufficient financing from the federal government.

Even so, in 2004, Governor Bush was able to accelerate eight projects; some $282 million alone was spent on the giant reservoir.

But by 2007, with a sagging sugar business looking to prop up its balance sheet and a new governor looking to burnish his environmental and national credentials, the fate of the Everglades was about to take another abrupt turn.

United States Sugar's debt soared that year to more than $500 million, former executives said, as operational problems and competitive pressures mounted. The company was in its second year of drought and further hampered by a recent water district restriction limiting a method of irrigation that sugar growers relied on during the dry seasons.

On Nov. 15, 2007, two United States Sugar lobbyists met in the governor's office with Mr. Crist and Eric Eikenberg, the deputy chief of staff under Mr. LeMieux.

The lobbyists, J. M. Stipanovich and Brian Ballard, had supported Mr. Crist's campaign for governor, and Mr. Ballard was one of its major fund-raisers. United States Sugar was still reeling from the government's decision to limit irrigation.

"It was a visit to open his eyes, to open his ears to the idea that a lot of these decisions were affecting their livelihood," Malcolm S. Wade Jr., a senior vice president at United States Sugar, said in an interview.

At the meeting, the governor announced that the state might be interested in buying United States Sugar. Mr. Crist said in an interview that he could not remember "the particulars" of when or how the idea had originated.

"There was a sense, or some indirect communication, that they might be a willing seller," the governor said.

Mr. Wade said that the company had been taken by surprise. "It caught everyone out of the blue," he said.

For its board members, Mr. Crist's overture was appealing in part because they figured a government purchase would be far more lucrative than a private deal.

"It wasn't another company coming in and bottom-fishing you," Mr. Wade said. "They knew it would be for fair-market appraisals."

A Setback Seems Averted

When the state began negotiating its ambitious plan to save the Everglades, key players were, notably, not invited.

Missing from the table, according to interviews and e-mail messages, were Miccosukee Indian tribe members, some of whom live in the Everglades; the Florida Crystals Corporation, the other major landowner in the area; and the federal agencies that partner with the state on restoration efforts.

Lawyers for the Miccosukees and Florida Crystals said their clients found out about the proposed deal with United States Sugar just a few days before it was announced to the public.

Likely supporters of the deal had been told months earlier, including Paul Tudor Jones II, a billionaire hedge-fund manager and philanthropist who co-founded the Everglades Foundation. The governor was friendly with Mr. Jones, who had contributed $400,000 to the state Republican Party — the largest single donation it ever received. And Mr. Jones was influential with other environmental groups that he and his foundation helped finance with millions of dollars.

As the negotiations proceeded, it became clear that financing was problematic. The cost of the land deal had initially been estimated at nearly $2 billion. But the water district was already committed to spending about $800 million for the giant reservoir outside Palm Beach. It could not afford both.

Responding to an e-mail message from a fellow environmentalist saying that the governor needed to understand the threat the reservoir posed to the United States Sugar land purchase, Mr. Jones replied, "He knows that and is doing the best he can."

Yet stopping construction of the reservoir presented a potential political disaster.

So on May 15, 2008, with the United States Sugar deal still not public, the water board suspended work on the reservoir because of "uncertainties related to unresolved litigation."

The litigation referred to a lawsuit environmental groups had filed over water usage from the reservoir. The announcement stunned the groups, which had made it clear that they did not want the project stopped.

"We were a convenient pretext," said Bradford H. Sewell, a lawyer for one of the groups.

There were enormous financial consequences. The district had to pay the reservoir's contractor a $2 million-a-month penalty for suspending the work. It eventually paid $25 million in penalties and fines for canceling the contract, on top of the $282 million it had already spent on the construction.

Fallout from the suspension was mounting when Shannon A. Estenoz, a member of the district's advisory board who had been on the board of the Everglades Foundation, reached out to Mr. Jones. In an e-mail message on May 21, Ms. Estenoz urged Mr. Jones to send a message to the governor: "For your information only, our decision to pause construction is entirely justifiable on its own even without the US Sugar deal hanging out there, but once the litigation is finished our legitimate reason for delay goes away," she said. "The message to the Governor is that we have until the end of the June at most."

On June 24, 2008, with Florida already experiencing a recession and property values sinking, Ms. Estenoz stood beside the governor at the edge of the Everglades as he unveiled the $1.75 billion deal. Local cheers and sweeping national headlines followed.

Politically, the timing was perfect. Mr. Crist was on the short list of potential running mates for Senator John McCain, the presumptive Republican nominee for president.

Ellen Simms, a former United States Sugar comptroller who views the deal skeptically, said that despite the high cost to taxpayers, it was difficult in those early days to question it. "Who can be against it?" she said. "This was going to save the Everglades. It's like being against motherhood and apple pie."

A few did speak out. The Miccosukee Tribe quickly filed a lawsuit, saying that the purchase would delay the restoration. "This is a death warrant for the Everglades," said Dexter Lehtinen, a lawyer for the tribe. "It sucks away all the money devoted to projects now in the pipeline."

Florida Crystals labeled the deal a taxpayer-supported buyout of United States Sugar, and seemed to be smarting from being left out of it. Some of its land, in fact, was needed to recreate the waterway through the Everglades, which Mr. Crist called "the missing link" of restoration.

Interviews and previously undisclosed records showed that Florida Crystals had made two written offers to join in the deal. But, with United States Sugar resisting having its competitor involved, talks with the governor's office went nowhere.

"For some reason, they weren't willing to negotiate in a way that would bring us to an accord," Mr. Crist said in an interview. "U.S. Sugar was. End of story."

Twists and Disappointments

The growing financial crisis in the summer of 2008 was rapidly changing the scope of the deal. On Nov. 11, 2008, Mr. Crist announced a smaller, $1.34 billion purchase of just over 180,000 acres of United States Sugar's land, but this time not including its other assets.

At a press conference, Mr. Crist called the new deal "miraculous."

For United States Sugar, at least, it looked that way. David Guest, an environmental lawyer and vocal supporter of the full buyout plan, said that the state's lead negotiator, Michael W. Sole, secretary of Florida's Environmental Protection Department, had given away far too much to United States Sugar.

"He got scammed," Mr. Guest said. "Everyone gasped in disbelief when he came back with what he did."

Mr. Sole said in an interview that he got the best deal he could.

But internal district documents revealed that the land had been overvalued by the two firms that performed the independent appraisals. Both relied on figures from 2004 to 2008, when a speculative real estate market had prices soaring.

If the current prices had been used, the state would be paying far less. For example, while the water district agreed to pay United States Sugar nearly $7,000 an acre for citrus land, it is now selling for $4,000 an acre, independent appraisers said recently in interviews.

The two outside appraisal firms used by the district — Anderson & Carr, of West Palm Beach, Fla., and Sewell, Valentich, Tillis & Associates, of Sarasota — came up with almost identical figures of around $1.3 billion, a rarity that raised some eyebrows.

"When I had heard that number, I couldn't swallow it — it was an unbelievable number," said Woody Hanson, a land appraiser in Fort Myers with extensive experience in the Everglades. "Then I looked closely at the appraisals to test them for reasonableness and, wow, there is just no way it makes sense for the taxpayers."

Neither appraisal firm used by the district would comment.

Eric Buermann, chairman of the district's advisory board, defended the appraisals but acknowledged that they had used outdated values. "At the time we had to make the decision," he said, "those were the latest, best numbers available."

Yet when the appraisals were updated in 2009, they still relied on sale prices from 2004 to 2006, documents showed. District officials said the appraisers assured them that prices had held steady.

In an interview, Mr. Crist said critics of the appraisals were underestimating the land's environmental value.

But the appraisers for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection had also questioned the methods of the two firms. According to internal e-mail, Thomas Porter, one of the department's appraisers, would not give his requisite approval by the deadline.

In response, United States Sugar's lawyers at Gunster persuaded the water district to change the contract so the department's sign-off was no longer required, records showed. Several days after Mr. Crist's November press conference, the water district learned that the firm it had hired to render the fairness opinion — an analysis of the entire deal — had also concluded that the land was worth far less.

The firm, Duff & Phelps, based in Manhattan, estimated the United States Sugar property was worth $930 million, about $400 million less than what the district would be paying.

When the firm's opinion arrived at the district, officials there consulted with Mr. Sole, the Environmental Protection secretary, about the best way to respond. The timing was critical because the district's board was scheduled to vote less than one month later, in mid-December, on the $1.34 billion purchase.

Officials who had commissioned the Duff & Phelps report, at a cost of $1.5 million, were now scrambling to minimize its impact. Internal e-mail messages showed that the district's scripted response for reporters was sent to Mr. Eikenberg, Mr. Crist's deputy chief of staff, as well as several prominent environmentalists.

"It is not an appraisal and does not provide a conclusion about the value of the acquisition relative to its public purpose," the district's statement said.

The deputy executive director for government and public affairs at the water district wrote talking points. "Note: There are differing views about the merit of fairness opinions within the business and academic communities," the public affairs official wrote, according to the e-mail.

Robert E. Coker, a United States Sugar vice president, was more blunt, characterizing Duff & Phelps publicly as "Huey, Dewey and Louie." He argued that Florida was paying bargain-basement prices, saying "the state is getting the Hope

Diamond at cubic zirconia prices."

Paying for the land was only the beginning. A slide show prepared by the district on restoration projects and construction detailed one estimate that put the effort at $8.6 billion and another at $12.3 billion, according to records obtained by The New York Times.

Even at the lower estimate and with the federal government paying its share, the district would struggle to bear the costs. The details of the deal were now raising concerns among some district board members and environmentalists.

An unlikely cheerleader emerged. George LeMieux, despite having insisted that he had nothing to do with the deal, appeared at a legal conference in Deerfield Beach and offered "an insider's account" of Everglades restoration.

In a keynote address that went uncovered by the local media, Mr. LeMieux described the United States Sugar deal as "an unprecedented opportunity, really a game changer."

"We really stand at the intersection of opportunity and possibility," he said. "We have a historic opportunity to change the face of the Everglades and our environment with this acquisition of the U.S. Sugar lands."

Financial adviser says Everglades purchase could sink Fla. water agency

Return to Top

03/08/2010
McClatchy Company Washington DC Bureau
Washington Rep. Adam Smith

By Curtis Morgan | The Miami Herald

An outside financial advisor has warned Florida water managers that plummeting revenues could leave them with a difficult choice between cutting operations and maintenance or sticking to Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp.

The memo, sent last month to the chief financial officer of the South Florida Water Management District, paints a bleak forecast, with deficits projected to increase to $110 million by 2012 if it pursues the $536 million land buy for Everglades restoration.

``If these projections (both revenues and expenses) are even close, the district must make some very difficult decisions,'' wrote David Moore of Public Financial Management Inc.

Read the full story at miami.com.

Crist stands by U.S. Sugar Corp. deal

Return to Top

03/08/2010
Florida Today - Online
JIM ASH

TALLAHASSEE -- Gov. Charlie Crist fired back today at critics who pummeled him for a $536 million Everglades land deal that they describe as a giveaway to U.S. Sugar Corp.

Crist said the criticism came from Florida Crystals, a business competitor of U.S. Sugar and a supporter of the governor's political foe, Marco Rubio.

In an editorial board meeting at the Tallahassee Democrat, Crist was asked about a Sunday story in The New York Times that showed the deal could put the state on the hook for $400 million in inflated land prices and that Everglades restoration could be delayed a generation.

The Democrat is a sister newspaper of FLORIDA TODAY.

In the article, former Gov. Jeb Bush panned the deal.

On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy, Bush was quoted as saying.

Crist said he has no qualms and is still a big supporter of the deal.

Absolutely. Without a doubt, Crist said. It s easy to criticize a difficult effort.

Crist said U.S. Sugar did not have an unfair advantage because his former chief of staff worked for the law firm that represents U.S. Sugar. The deal was also criticized by U.S. Sugar competitor, Florida Crystals, a big supporter of Crist s opponent in the Republican race for the U.S. Senate, Marco Rubio.

They (U.S. Sugar) had a stronger voice because they are a willing seller. That s it. It s that simple, Crist said of U.S. Sugar. So Florida Crystals criticizes it because they were not a willing seller. I know what drives some arguments sometimes. I m not stupid.

Rubio s response, in a written statement.

This deal is nothing more than a massive taxpayer-funded bailout for a top Charlie Crist campaign donor and a profitable bonanza for Crist s inner circle.

Yet Another Jeb Bush Dig at Charlie Crist

Return to Top

03/08/2010
Newsweek - Online
Arian Campo-Flores

The New York Times has an eye-opening story today about Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's questionable deal to buy land from United States Sugar for Everglades restoration. The whole thing is worth reading, but I'd like to draw attention to just a few lines in the 4,000-word story. Listen to what former Gov. Jeb Bush had to say about the Crist deal. Bush was "deeply disappointed," he told the paper. "On a net basis, this appears to me there has been a replacement of science-based environmental policy for photo-op environmental policy." Ouch.

This is only the latest example in recent weeks of Bush taking digs at his successor. It's no secret that there's no love lost between the two men. Nor is it a secret that in the Republican primary for U.S. Senate, Bush prefers Marco Rubio, a former Florida House speaker, over Crist. Yet he has remained publicly neutral in the race, and over the past year, he has mostly kept his thoughts on the contest to himself. Recently, however, that's changed.

In late January, Bush appeared on the Today Show and implicitly criticized Crist for backing President Obama's stimulus plan. While it was "more than appropriate" for Crist to appear alongside the president at a rally in Fort Myers in support of the stimulus, Bush said, "I wouldn't have necessarily embraced the stimulus plan that did not have support in the state and campaign for it and put Republicans in a vulnerable position." Late last month, Bush was even more pointed. He called Crist's support for Obama's stimulus plan "unforgivable" and blasted him as the "only statewide political leader, that I'm aware of, that embraced the stimulus package when Republicans were fighting to suggest an alternative."

All of this seems to signal that Bush is getting more comfortable selectively inserting himself in the primary matchup,

either by directing digs at Crist or offering kind words for Rubio. It also increases speculation that Bush will eventually offer his endorsement to Rubio. If he does, which appears more and more likely, he'd probably wait until closer to the primary date (Aug. 24) to ensure it packed more punch.

Bush's formal backing would offer Rubio yet another boost (not that he appears to need much help these days, given his skyrocketing trajectory). Bush remains a highly popular figure among Florida conservatives, who are the most likely to turn out in a GOP primary. Already, Rubio has benefited from the assistance of numerous Bush confidants. His sons, Jeb Jr. and George P., endorsed Rubio and are raising money for him, and Bush loyalists like Jorge Arrizurieta and Ann Herberger are helping out Rubio's campaign. A blessing from the man himself, though, would be the most gratifying prize of all.

Tag(s): 2010 Elections, charlie crist, marco rubio

Posted By: GREGPARKER77 (March 8, 2010 at 12:51 PM)

Jeb is merely keeping in name in the public arena until 2016.

Crist answers critics of land deal

Return to Top

03/08/2010
Pensacola News Journal - Online
Jim Ash Florida Capital Bureau Chief March 8, 2010

TALLAHASSEE -- Gov. Charlie Crist fired back today at critics who pummeled him for a $536 million Everglades land deal that they describe as a giveaway to U.S. Sugar Corp.

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They (U.S. Sugar) had a stronger voice because they are a willing seller. That s it. It s that simple, Crist said of U.S. Sugar. So Florida Crystals criticizes it because they were not a willing seller. I know what drives some arguments sometimes. I m not stupid.

Rubio s response, in a written statement.

This deal is nothing more than a massive taxpayer-funded bailout for a top Charlie Crist campaign donor and a profitable bonanza for Crist s inner circle.

Rubio smacks Crist on Everglades deal

Return to Top

03/08/2010
St. Petersburg Times - Online

Marco Rubio reacts to today's New York Times piece on the Everglades deal: "This deal is nothing more than a massive taxpayer-funded bailout for a top Charlie Crist campaign donor and a profitable bonanza for Crist's inner circle.

"Once again Charlie Crist has put his political ambition ahead of the people of Florida, and once again the results are disastrous for taxpayers. In fact, this bailout plan is the second most expensive photo op Charlie Crist has ever staged.

"Charlie Crist's bailout plan will require higher taxes and increased debt, and it does nothing for the Everglades. In fact, it actually halts real restoration projects started by Jeb Bush, which were already under way.

"Charlie Crist simply can't be trusted to go to Washington to fight massive government spending because more often than not he's the one proposing it."

UPDATE: From Crist campaign spokesman Amanda Henneberg: "Marco Rubio is being supported in this campaign and in previous campaigns by Florida Crystals Sugar company, who is the number one opponent to this Everglades restoration purchase. What else would you expect from a lobbyist who is bought and paid for by special interests?"

Grandiose plan to rescue Everglades, help St. Lucie River teeters on the edge

Return to Top

03/08/2010
TCPalm.com

It started out so big, so bold and with so much promise for healing the River of Grass that environmentalists proclaimed it the holy grail of Everglades restoration.

It also would help protect the St. Lucie River from polluted water from Lake Okeechoee. To protect the fragile Glades from pollution flowing off farms, ranches and yards, water managers currently are forced to flush Lake O's dirty excess where it isn't needed — down the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers, triggering fish-killing algae blooms in delicate estuaries and anger in waterfront homes.

But 20 months after Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled his $1.75 billion bid to buy out the U.S. Sugar Corp., the grail is at serious risk of slipping away — rather, what's left of it.

Crist remains confident his landmark land buy will survive. "It's a done deal," he told The Miami Herald. "It's got to be done."

Others, even supporters like Drew Martin, Everglades chairman for the Sierra Club, are less certain. "There is no question it's hanging by a thread," he said.

With revenues evaporating like Lake Okeechobee on a summer day, South Florida Water Management District leaders are balking at bankrolling even the whittled-down first phase approved nine months ago: $536 million for 72,800 acres of citrus groves and sugar fields, with options on 107,500 more.

Water District Chairman Eric Buermann expects the governing board to crunch the numbers again when it meets this week. Buermann, a Miami lawyer appointed by Crist, has championed "the governor's vision," but acknowledged he now questions if the agency can still afford it.

Property values in the 16 counties that pay the district's bills have dropped an estimated 16 percent since 2008. In a February letter made public Friday, the district's outside financial advisor warned that mounting deficits — projected to hit $110 million by 2012 — could force "very difficult decisions." A financial "out" clause in the contract gives the board an option to walk away.

"It's not a rosy picture, and I'm not going to try to portray it as one," Buermann said.

The chunk of Big Sugar offers the promise of fixing -- someday, at uncertain but staggering cost -- what many experts see as a gaping hole in plans to replumb the Everglades: Not enough land to catch and clean water.

But a deal that Crist had hoped would ensure his environmental legacy has morphed into a 900-pound political gorilla toting a ton of questions, along with $45 million in budget-straining annual debt for the district.

The reeling economy has forced two down-sizings. An ambitious five-month fast track to get it done has slowed to a crawl. Plans to bankroll the deal with bonds have been pinched by state lawmakers and a Palm Beach County judge, and face more scrutiny from the Florida Supreme Court in April.

Two powerful foes -- rival grower Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe -- have led a legal and lobbying assault. They paint the deal as a sweetheart bailout for a major Crist campaign donor that would stick the state with land it can't afford to build anything on for decades.

"It's not driven by science. It's not driven by need," said Gaston Cantens, a Florida Crystals vice president. "It was driven by one person's political ambition and one company's necessities."

But environmentalists doubt U.S. Sugar's chief competitor has interest in protecting anything but its bottom line.

"It's ridiculous," said Kirk Fordham, chief executive officer of the Everglades Foundation. "If we thought the purchase would paralyze every restoration project, we wouldn't support it."

During a phone interview last week from a car crossing Alligator Alley, Crist bristled at critics' allegations.

"I understand Florida Crystals plays hardball, but I really don't give a damn," he said. "What's important is doing what's right. What is right is preserving this magnificent place."

A lot has soured since since the sunny day in June 2008 when Crist laid out his "monumental" plan: Buy out Florida's largest sugar grower and use its 300-square-mile empire to restore the "missing link" between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, long ago severed by farms.

U.S. Sugar would pocket $1.75 billion and profits from at least six years of continued farming. The state would get a real chance to salvage what's left of the Everglades.

The deal offers what the $12 billion state-federal restoration approved a decade ago did not: enough land to store and clean water south of Lake Okeechobee, which once spilled over freely to drive the flow of the River of Grass.

Because Big Sugar was off-limits, engineers originally planned around it, concocting an uncertain $1 billion scheme to hold water in hundreds of wells deep underground. But a decade of study since, honed with computer and climate models, showed the Glades need more water and places to store and scrub it.

"From a scientific perspective, we know that answer was staring us right in the face," said Water District Deputy Executive Director Tommy Strowd. "In the natural system, water doesn't go to the estuaries. That water had to go south."

Crist's "missing link" rhetoric, summoning visions of marsh and hammock, oversold reality. Most scientists consider sugar lands — saturated with fertilizers and sunken from erosion — too far gone to revive.

The real plan is less picturesque but, water managers say, critical: dammed reservoirs, pollution treatment marshes and diesel pumps.

Crist dropped his bombshell offer in November 2007 to two high-powered U.S. Sugar lobbyists, Brian Ballard and J.M. 'Mac' Stipanovich.

They had wanted to gripe about a milestone defeat at the hands of Crist's appointees to the water board, who halted the practice of "back-pumping" polluted farm canals to replenish Lake Okeechobee. They emerged, after eight months of hush-hush talks, with what would rank as the biggest conservation land buy in state history.

Politically, it seemed to shape up as a done deal.

The governor, with politicos touting him as running mate material for presidential candidate John McCain, stood at the peak of his popularity and clout. The Water District had the power to finance the deal without approval from a potentially meddlesome Legislature. Its board was controlled by Crist picks, other than one hold-over from Gov. Jeb Bush.

It was all so dazzling it was easy to be distracted from critical details.

That month, Florida ascended to No. 2 nationally for rotten mortgages, on the way to a housing market meltdown. Five months later, citing the economy, Crist downsized to a $1.34 billion land-only deal. Four months after that, that proposal was split into two cheaper chunks.

"In hindsight, the attempt to purchase every nut and bolt, every rail car, was probably too ambitious," Fordham said. "Now, it's something we can digest."

But the deal hasn't been just victim of the burst real estate bubble. The governor's office rolled it out without cluing in, let alone cutting in, important Glades players.

"This was a deal cut behind closed doors, then shoved down everybody's throats," said Barbara Miedema, vice president of the Belle Glade-based Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative.

Questions soon drowned hoopla. Florida Crystals, controlled by the influential Fanjul family, and the Miccosukee Tribe have hammered away, winning delays and constraints.

Their lawsuit persuaded a Palm Beach judge to slash district borrowing plans by two-thirds -- a major blow to the bigger Phase Two land buy environmentalists consider critical. Crystals lobbyists worked the Legislature, coming away with a debt cap that will crimp future bond deals. The Supreme Court rebuffed Water District requests to expedite an appeal, setting its hearing for April 7 — a week after a contract deadline expires, opening the door for a board vote this week on whether to extend the deal.

Tribe attorney Dexter Lehtinen see big problems in the smaller deal: half a billion dollars spent on land that will require multibillion-dollar projects the state can't afford. Shredding of a restoration blueprint that took years to craft. Millions diverted from projects that promised faster relief.

The way Lehtinen reads the terms and the economy, U.S. Sugar can keep farming for decades while pollution pushes deep into tribal lands.

"The only thing this guarantees is delay," he said.

Florida Crystals' Cantens called it "a deal done backwards. Instead of identifying what you need, we're just going to buy this land."

Most of U.S. Sugar's broadly scattered parcels are miles from marshes they're intended to help. District engineers say they can do the job with those tracts alone, but not as cheaply or simply. Still, most concepts that water managers have sketched so far — with eye-popping price tags estimated at $3 billion to $30 billion — target more land owned by its chief rival.

Cantens said early talks of swapping land or buying U.S. Sugar's assets went nowhere. He and other growers believe U.S. Sugar is fighting to hang on to a deal designed to boost its flagging fortunes, letting it unload money-losing citrus groves and pay down hundreds of millions it borrowed for a state-of-the-art mill.

Robert Coker, a U.S Sugar vice president, said the company is sound and has been flexible to help preserve "the governor's bold vision for the Everglades." He sees only one major obstacle to closing the deal: Florida Crystals. "They have said things, alleged things, done everything humanly, legally and emotionally possible to try to keep this from happening."

Historically, a lot of mud is slung in Glades disputes. This one has been no exception.

Skeptics roll their eyes at Crist's claim of conceiving the buyout, saying it smacks more of the high-wire high-finance practiced by Paul Tudor Jones II, a billionaire Wall Street wizard, part-time Islamorada resident, avid tarpon angler and chair of the Everglades Foundation.

They fume over, as Miedema put it, "cozy" connections. U.S. Sugar is a big campaign donor. Its lobbyists are political confidantes to Crist. The chairman of its law firm, Gunster, Yoakley & Stewert, is George LeMieux, who left as Crist's chief of staff a month after the governor pitched the buyout. It goes on.

"They think if you just put 'Everglades restoration' on the cover sheet, we're all going to buy it," Lehtinen said. "You're just using that to excuse insider deals and sweetheart deals."

Crist dismissed charges of impropriety. An aide for LeMieux, later appointed by Crist to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat, said the senator did not work on the deal and would not profit from it.

To Florida environmental Secretary Mike Sole, who negotiated the deal, critics are trying to connect dots that lead nowhere. "There is absolutely no shred of truth to any accusations," he said.

Supporters concede the deal has trade-offs, but only short-term. They say there may never be a better or cheaper chance to grab so much land where it is needed.

"It's a blessing and a curse," said Everglades authority Martha Musgrove, who led civic forums on the deal's pros and cons. "It's a blessing because there is land available from a willing seller. It's a curse because it's so damn hard financing it."

For water managers, looming new demands to settle water quality violations in a national wildlife refuge and meet tough new federal water pollution standards add to the frustration. They need more land now more than when the governor unveiled the deal.

"Setting aside for a minute where you put it, north of the lake, south of the lake, in downtown Fort Lauderdale, it's absolutely 100 percent necessary to expand," said Water District board member Shannon Estenoz, a Plantation environmentalist who has backed the deal.

Crist has pulled the deal from the brink once before. In the days before a critical vote in December 2009, he phoned board members while on his honeymoon and dispatched Sole to push the deal in person. Two of his appointees defected but it survived, 4-3.

Now he's a lame duck governor trailing in a Senate race. Supporters wonder if he can still hold the controversial deal together. He shored up support two week ago, filling three seats on what is now an all-Crist water board. The Sugar deal was his litmus test.

"I won't appoint people to the board who don't believe in it," he said. "If we don't do this, if we don't save this treasure, shame on us."

CHANNEL 5 NEWS 2010-03-08 05:34:54

Return to Top

03/08/2010
WPTV-TV
WEST PALM BEACH

NBC

5 WPTV

CHANNEL 5 NEWS

2010-03-08

05:34:54

ELIGIBILITY. THE AGENCY DID NOT IMMEDIATELY RESPOND TO OUR NEWS PARTNERS AT THE SUN- SENTINEL, WHICH PUBLISHED THE REPORT. GAMBLING WILL BE THE HOT TOPIC THIS WEEK FOR FLORIDA LEGISLATORS WHO ARE BEGINNING THEIR SECOND WEEK OF SESSIONS. THEY ARE MAKING PROGRESS ON GETTING A GAMBLING AGREEMENT WITH THE SEMINOLE INDIAN TRIBE. THIS, ACCORDING TO OUR NEWS PARTNERS AT THE 'SUN-SENTINEL.' UNDER CURRENT DISCUSSIONS, THE TRIBE WOULD GET A FIVE-YEAR AUTHORIZATION TO OPERATE BLACKJACK TABLES AT FOUR OF ITS SEVEN RESORTS, IN EXCHANGE FOR ANNUAL PAYMENTS TO THE STATE. THE DEAL TO BUY LAND FROM U.S. SUGAR TO HELP RESTORE THE EVERGLADES MAY FALL VICTIM TO ECONOMIC BELT TIGHTENING. ACCORDING TO OUR NEWS PARTNERS AT THE SUN-SENTINEL -- THE SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT BOARD WILL MEET THURSDAY TO DISCUSS EXTENDING THE MARCH 31ST DEADLINE TO BUY 73 THOUSAND ACRES OF LAND TO RESTORE WATER FLOWS FROM LAKE OKEECHOBEE. BUT THE 536 MILLION DOLLAR PRICE TAG HAS SOME RECONSIDERING THE DEAL IN THE MIDST OF BUDGET SHORTFALLS AND CUTS. TAXPAYER DOLLARS WOULD BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEBT. IF YOU SEE MORE CHINESE VISITORS TO OUR AREA, IT'S NO ACCIDENT. 'VISIT FLORIDA' WHICH MARKETS STATE TOURISM OVERSEAS, IS

TRYING TO ATTRACT A GROWING NUMBER OF CHINESE TO OUR STATE-- ESPECIALLY HERE IN THE SOUTH. PALM BEACH COUNTY TOURISM OFFICIALS, FOR EXAMPLE, NOW HAVE SOME TOURIST BROCHURES WRITTEN IN MANDARIN . DON'T FORGET TO LOG ONTO THE FINANCIAL SURVIVAL GUIDE SECTION OF WPTV DOT COM FOR WAYS TO HELP YOU STAY AFLOAT FINANCIALLY. THERE YOU WILL FIND HOW TO GET A CREDIT CARD IN THIS TIGHT ECONOMY.

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