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Everglades clean-up progress is slow, judge growing impatient

03/17/2010

McClatchy Company Washington DC Bureau

Curtis Morgan

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Chief U.S. District Judge Federico Moreno made it clear Tuesday that his patience was nearing an end -- both with delays in the controversial land deal and the glacial pace of the cleanup.

"When is it ever going to end? I guess 'When is it ever going to begin?' is the better question," the judge grouched during a hearing in the 22-year-old lawsuit that forced Florida to reduce pollution flowing into the Everglades.

The judge said he would issue rulings later on pending motions, some of which he had put on hold while the South Florida Water Management District pursued a land deal with the U.S. Sugar Corp. that has been downsized twice because of declining tax revenues.

To read the complete article, visit www.miamiherald.com.

EDITORIAL: A Good Deal for the Everglades

03/17/2010

New York Times

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The effort to restore Florida's Everglades has been revived thanks to the efforts of President Obama and Florida's Republican governor, Charlie Crist. The Obama administration has committed more than \$300 million in new money, and construction on important projects — including lifting a section of the Tamiami Trail to bring freshwater to the Everglades — is under way.

Last week, the state agency that oversees the restoration voted unanimously to press forward with Mr. Crist's controversial — but potentially game-changing — \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres of land from the United States Sugar Corporation. The land would eventually be taken out of agricultural production, removing a major source of pollution, and converted into reservoirs and artificial marshes to store and clean water for later release into the Everglades during the dry season.

The agency — the South Florida Water Management District — had been under mounting pressure to kill the deal. Florida Crystals, another big and politically connected sugar company, lobbied ferociously against the deal with its rival. Some environmentalists complained that Mr. Crist paid too much and that the cost of the deal would crowd out other restoration projects.

But some of those projects — a string of underground storage wells, for instance — made little sense to begin with and none are as important as the land deal. The payout to United States Sugar and some other aspects of the deal seem excessive. But the agency can negotiate the price downward or cancel the arrangement if United States Sugar refuses to bargain or if the economy keeps tanking and the deal becomes unaffordable.

What the taxpayers need to remember is that this is a very good deal for the environment. Without an ample supply of clean, fresh water, the Everglades will never be restored to anything approaching their former vitality.

There is no shortage of rainfall in Florida. What's in short supply is places to store it during the rainy season when Lake Okeechobee overflows, places from which the water can be released when it is needed during the dry season to nourish wildlife, prevent catastrophic fire and provide clean water to Florida Bay.

Far more will have to happen to restore the water flows that once sustained the Everglades. But the United States Sugar lands are a critically important first step.

Judge signals impatience with Everglades cleanup, land deal

03/17/2010

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Miami Herald, The
Morgan, Curtis

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The Miccosukee Tribe, which has filed multiple lawsuits and motions in an effort to block what is now a \$536 million land deal, wants the judge to order a stalled \$700 million reservoir restarted and to rescind plans to cancel a \$3.9 million project to improve the performance of the pollution-cleaning marshes -- a decision the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed to delay for 75 days.

The water district and federal government also are negotiating a settlement over water quality violations in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge -- a process likely to require more land to expand the state's \$1 billion system of pollution-cleansing marshes.

Dexter Lehtinen , attorney for the Miccosukees, contended that the proposed settlement would protect federal park lands while exposing tribal lands to higher levels of pollution. He and attorneys for rival growers fighting the deal urged Moreno to apply a financial litmus test to state pledges.

Though he proclaimed himself a ``doubting Thomas" on the state closing the sugar deal, Moreno said his legal authority did not extend to budget decisions.

David Guest , an attorney for the environmental law firm Earthjustice, said the judge closed the door on critics' effort to use the long-standing pollution lawsuit to open a second case against the sugar deal. The Florida Supreme Court next month is scheduled to hear an appeal of district plans to bankroll the deal with bonds.

``Today made it very clear this will not be used as a venue to shoot the tires off the sugar deal," Guest said.

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EDITORIALS OF THE TIMES

03/17/2010

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The New York Times said in editorials for Wednesday, March 17:

WILL CHINA LISTEN?

The drumbeat of complaints in Washington about China's manipulation of its currency – and the deafening silence pretty much everywhere else – might lead one to think that this is just an American problem. It isn't.

China's decision to base its economic growth on exporting deliberately undervalued goods is threatening economies around the world. It is fueling huge trade deficits in the United States and Europe. Even worse, it is crowding out exports from other developing countries, threatening their hopes of recovery.

After treading lightly on the subject of China, President Barack Obama vowed last month to "get much tougher" about China's cheap currency. On Monday, 130 members of Congress sent a letter to Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, demanding that the Obama administration designate China as a currency manipulator in a report due to Congress next month. On Tuesday, a bipartisan group of senators introduced a bill aimed to force the administration's hand. This would ease the way to imposing retaliatory trade barriers against Chinese goods.

So far, China has been defiant. On Sunday, after the close of the annual National People's Congress, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao rejected American complaints as "a kind of trade protectionism" and made clear that he had no plan to do anything differently.

Since 2003, China's central bank has been purchasing huge amounts of dollars to keep the value of the renminbi artificially low against the dollar. China backed away somewhat in 2005, allowing its currency to appreciate slowly from 8.25 yuan to the dollar to about 6.83 yuan by 2008. As the global recession hit it slammed on the brakes in order to protect its exports. The renminbi has remained at about 6.83 yuan since then and the pain has been felt in countries as far apart as Mexico and India.

Beijing's intervention is a textbook example of the beggar-thy-neighbor competitive devaluation forbidden by the International Monetary Fund's charter.

The challenge now is how to persuade China to at least moderate its strategy without unleashing something even more destructive. As the decibel level has risen in Washington, Chinese officials have implicitly warned that they could retaliate by dumping Treasury bills from their central bank's \$2.4 trillion cache.

This would be risky for both countries. The move would weaken the dollar and lessen the value of China's holdings. The United States might weather a sell-off or even benefit from the drop in the dollar's value, but any precipitous move could further disrupt the skittish financial markets. And Beijing has other potential weapons, like tariffs and quotas. There is no guarantee of rationality in these showdowns. The fallout from a trade war would be felt around the world.

It makes a lot more sense to address the problem in a multilateral setting, where China couldn't portray itself as a weak, righteous fighter holding out against arbitrary American power. Retaliation, or even the threat, would carry more legitimacy if it were part of a multilateral agreement and done on a world stage.

One way would be to press the IMF to officially pronounce on whether China is breaking the rules and manipulating its exchange rate. That is part of the fund's job, though it has preferred not to pick the fight. China would find it far harder to reject an IMF determination than any American criticism. It could open the door for other aggrieved trading nations to eventually seek legal redress at the World Trade Organization.

Even before that, it would help if some other countries – certainly those in the European Union, but perhaps aspiring players including India and South Korea – started publicly making the case that the cheap renminbi is hurting them, too.

The world's battered economy is certainly in no shape to keep absorbing China's exports, subsidized through a cheap currency policy. The more countries that say this, the more likely Beijing will consider changing course – and the less likely this disagreement will escalate into a fight that no one can win.

A GOOD DEAL FOR THE EVERGLADES

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'SAN PATRICIO'

On this day of all days in the Irish-American calendar, when ethnic pride swells, let's raise a toast: Here's to the Irish, and here's to the rest of us. May we never forget where we came from. Nearly all of us were Mexicans once. That is: the new immigrants, poor and reviled, propelled by hope and hunger into America's prickly embrace.

What brings this juxtaposition to mind is "San Patricio," a new album from Paddy Moloney of the great Irish traditionalist band the Chieftains. It commemorates a historical footnote: the San Patricio battalion of Irish-immigrant soldiers who deserted the U.S. Army and fought for Mexico in the Mexican-American War of 1846-48. They picked the losing side, were captured, executed or branded as traitors, and then forgotten, except by Mexicans.

Moloney, a musician of restless curiosity, saw it as a tale of tragedy and loss, but also a chance for creative collision.

"If the Irish were there, there would most certainly have been music," he says. The same goes for the Mexicans. He invited Irish, Mexican and American musicians to play and sing, to see what would happen.

What happened was not all dolorous lamentation, though there is some of that. The rest is joy, thoroughly Mexican yet utterly Irish, carried aloft by tin whistles, skin drums, pipes, harps, guitars and stomping feet. It's a mix you've never heard, but eerily familiar. Listen to the classic "Cancion Mixteca," sung in Spanish by the Mexican supergroup Los Tigres del Norte, accompanied by accordion, bajo sexto, tin whistle and uilleann pipes.

"How far I am from the land where I was born! Immense longing invades my thoughts, and when I see myself as alone and sad as a leaf in the wind, I want to cry. I want to die of sorrow."

That old song, woven into the Mexican soul, is as Irish as it gets. And it's an American song, too. We are all people who have lost our land in one sad way and found another. Whether we lament and celebrate in a pub or cantina, whether our tricolor flag has a cactus on it or not, we are closer to one another than we remember.

TAXI RIP-OFF

Taking a taxi in New York City is nearly always an adventure. Sometimes the driver is the best tour guide in the city. Sometimes not. Now comes evidence that thousands of unscrupulous cabbies have been cheating passengers – to the tune of \$8 million over two years – by pushing a button that automatically doubled the fares.

The only good news here is that modern technology uncovered the scam, and more technology, which is on the way, could help stop it.

The New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission reported that over the last two years, about 3,000 of the city's roughly 48,000 cabbies repeatedly – 100 times or more – overcharged riders in the city by secretly switching to the higher suburban rate. The maneuver added an average of \$4 to \$5 to the meter on 1.8 million rides.

One driver, whose license has been revoked, overcharged 574 passengers during a single month. The commission also found that as many as 35,500 drivers padded their fares at least once.

Matthew Daus, the commissioner, says that the global positioning system installed two years ago in all city cabs helped uncover the violations. Taxi headquarters can track where a cab picks up and drops off a customer and how much the fare costs. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance, which represents cabbies, says the global positioning technology and the new meters can't be trusted. Drivers add that it's too easy to push the wrong button by accident, an excuse that is hard to fathom if it kept happening.

The commission promises short- and long-term fixes. In a few weeks, a notice will appear on the passenger's television screen whenever the driver is charging the suburban fare. Eventually, smart meters connected to the GPS devices will shift automatically when the taxi crosses the city line into the suburbs.

In the meantime, a tip for the rider: If the meter says Zone 1, you're getting the city fare. Zone 4 is for trips into the suburbs. If the meter is wrong, you can argue with the driver. Or call 311. Or, next time, try the bus.

Everglades purchase must be upheld

03/17/2010

Oracle, The

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A vote from the board of the South Florida Water Management District is keeping an Everglades restoration project alive — for now.

The deal, proposed by Gov. Charlie Crist, allows the state to spend \$536 million to purchase 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation land in the Everglades. This restoration project will help areas that have been polluted for decades by fertilizers and urban runoff.

Unfortunately, the deal is only safe for a month until the Florida Supreme Court makes its final decision, which should be in support of the purchase.

It may be expensive, but land restoration will be critical for protecting the states' estuaries and ensuring a sustainable future.

The plan, which has been downsized twice, will convert thousands of acres of sugarcane land to water-cleansing marshes, according to the Miami Herald. The corporation could still farm for the next seven years, and the state would have the option of purchasing another 100,000 acres in the future.

According to Jill Zima Borksi, the Florida Keys Travel Examiner, most of the Florida Keys' residents are excited about the plan for the much-needed work that will improve the area. Without it, the future of the Everglades, its wildlife and its residents cannot be guaranteed.

The Everglades are a state focal point and its restoration should be seen as a priority. The government is finally doing the right thing by using money to aid the sustainability of this important piece of land, and the deal must proceed.

Sara Fain, co-chair of the Everglades Coalition said to the Miami Herald that U.S. Sugar was the only company willing to sell land to the government.

If this deal doesn't go through, it may be harder for Florida to acquire Everglades land in the future. "You have a mission to restore the Everglades, and this is what you need to do to it," Fain said.

The price tag may be a stumbling block for some who see a half billion dollars as too much for environmental restoration, but this project will create jobs, ensure the sustainability of the Everglades and increase tourism in South Florida.

This is not wasteful spending but the restoration of something that is an important part of Florida history and the economy.

Xhenis Berberi is a senior majoring in political science and economics.

Palm Beach County questions costs of governor's Everglades restoration land deal

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03/16/2010

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

The numbers for Gov. Charlie Crist's blockbuster Everglades land deal just aren't adding up for Palm Beach County officials worried about seeing local environmental projects sacrificed to help cover the \$536 million cost.

Palm Beach County commissioners on Tuesday questioned whether Crist's plan to buy 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar Corp. could be accomplished without delaying overdue Everglades restoration efforts or raising South Florida property taxes.

"I don't see how you are going to do it without a tax [increase]," Commissioner Priscilla Taylor said. "Something has got to go."

The U.S. Sugar land, much of it in western Palm Beach County, would be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades.

But the land deal comes amid a struggling economy and budget shortfalls from Tallahassee to Palm Beach County. Also, local restoration projects that could cost as much as \$800 million remain unfinished.

The South Florida Water Management District, which would buy the U.S. Sugar land, already put the brakes on a massive, unfinished Everglades restoration reservoir in western Palm Beach County that so far cost South Florida taxpayers almost \$280 million. That reservoir now may not fit into restoration plans envisioned for the U.S. Sugar land.

District officials and the governor have said they can accomplish the U.S. Sugar deal and other long-planned Everglades restoration projects without raising property taxes.

"Gov. Crist isn't going to be governor after November," Commission Chairman Burt Aaronson said. "Where is the money going to come from?"

The county also wants to create an industrial distribution center, called an inland port, on farmland near Lake Okeechobee that environmentalists contend is too close to proposed Everglades restoration.

The county considers the inland port a way to create thousands of jobs at a distribution hub linked to coastal ports by rail and truck routes.

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Palm Beach County questions costs of governor's Everglades restoration land deal

March 16, 2010|By Andy Reid, Sun Sentinel

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Palm Beach County environmental projects still on the to-do list include proposals to keep polluted muck from washing into the Lake Worth Lagoon and restoring water flows cut off by farming and development to the Loxahatchee River.

The district in 2008 completed work on a \$217 million reservoir made from old rock pits at the Palm Beach Aggregates mining company. The reservoir, which holds 15 billion gallons, stores water intended to rehydrate the Loxahatchee River, but the district has yet to install the multimillion-dollar pumps needed to push the water north to the river.

County commissioners on Tuesday tried to get water management district Deputy Executive Director Ken Ammon to say whether the agency that must sign off on environmental permits would support the inland port proposal.

