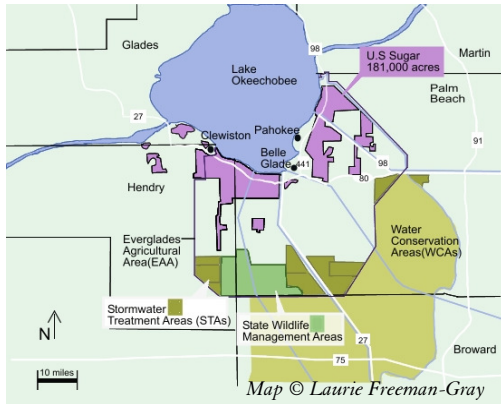


EAA Land Acquisition Benefits to Florida's Environment and Economy



Photo © RJ Wiley



Public acquisition of at least 180,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corporation's (USSC) lands, including extensive acreage in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), is a vital step toward the restoration of the Everglades.

Audubon believes

- provide additional storage for excess water that can be maintained in the EAA during wet periods,
- offer an alternative source of water to reduce withdrawals during dry periods,
- ensure the lake's ecosystems will enjoy more natural, and beneficial, water level changes,
- create increased recreational opportunities such as fishing, hunting, and bird watching,
- furnish urban areas with a more reliable source of water, and
- fuel Florida's economy while providing the above benefits.

that this acquisition will ultimately provide exceptional benefits for Florida's environment and economy.

It has long been recognized that Everglades restoration efforts have been compromised as a result of insufficient available land in the EAA on which to build reservoirs and water treatment areas. Acquiring this land provides an unprecedented opportunity to store, treat and convey water in a manner that more naturally mimics the historic Everglades. South Florida will experience system-wide benefits when the ecological productivity of the Everglades more closely resembles its natural characteristics on account of the flow of freshwater from Lake Okeechobee to Everglades National Park and Florida Bay. The projects made possible by the purchase will also reduce competition for water supply, create recreational opportunities for tourism, and thereby help the economy.

Benefits to Lake Okeechobee and Northern Estuaries

The current water management system in and around Lake Okeechobee is inadequate to serve the multiple purposes for which the system is utilized. The lake stores water for agriculture and urban needs, and during droughts the lake becomes a critical source of water. Management of the lake for water supply alone harms the lake's recreational and wildlife resources. For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service designated the lake's 150 square miles of marshes as critical habitat for the federally endangered snail kite. Despite this protection, Audubon scientists have witnessed only one successful nesting year since 1995, and in most years, the birds have not even attempted to nest. This is attributed to fluctuating lake levels, which result from managing the lake as the sole major water storage alternative.

The USSC land acreage is large enough to:

- dramatically reduce the need for large harmful discharges to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries,

The acquisition of USSC lands will provide numerous critical benefits to the lake and coastal estuaries. Rather than being caught in a constant effort to survive, the lake and the estuaries will have years to recover and thrive.

Benefits to the Everglades Protection Area

The Everglades Protection Area (EPA), including the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, has also suffered greatly from both water management activities and high levels of nutrients in agricultural and urban runoff. Snail kite nesting has been virtually eliminated from the area, and the altered habitat has had a serious impact on wading bird populations. Fresh-flowing water, delivered in more natural cycles, is necessary for the Everglades to function as a healthy ecosystem. The acquisition of USSC lands and the implementation of projects will allow for water deliveries of sufficient quantity and quality to the natural system. These deliveries will bring the ecosystem back from its current precarious tipping point.

Ecologically sensitive water deliveries can:

- reinstate representative sub-tropical Everglades plant communities,
- restore snail kite and wading bird nesting,
- protect remaining organic soils,
- prevent tree islands from drowning, and
- benefit the myriad of wildlife species characteristic only of South Florida.



Proposed reservoirs and both existing and proposed Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) can accept large amounts of water from Lake Okeechobee. The water can be treated and allowed to flow south to replenish the Everglades, rather than being harmfully dumped into the estuaries. The existing STA 3-4 was designed to clean Lake Okeechobee's water in order to spare the estuaries. However, the area can only handle about one-fourth of the water needed to be sent south from the lake into the Everglades. USSC lands are large enough to hold STAs and reservoirs that can achieve the long-sought goal of sending clean water south at the right times and in the right amounts.

Benefits to Southern Everglades and Florida Bay

The southern end of the Everglades ecosystem historically contained the habitat responsible for the abundance of wildlife in the Everglades. Located at the end of a chain of habitat destruction, the southern end of the system has long suffered a cascade of impacts from alterations throughout the entire Everglades ecosystem.

Habitat declines in the southern mangrove zone and Florida Bay is exhibited by documented declines of fish-eating birds (e.g. pelicans, osprey, eagles), predatory fishes, alligators, and crocodiles. These declines indicate a common-cause denominator, which is likely a reduction in small fish and invertebrate populations that make up the base of the food chain. As an example, Audubon scientists recently recorded the worst roseate spoonbill nesting season in Florida Bay since the 1960s.

Downstream ecosystems will benefit immensely from the large storage capacity provided by USSC lands. Until we have the capacity to store sufficient amounts of water, the southern part of the system will continue to degrade as a result of receiving too little fresh water. The restoration projects planned to benefit Everglades National Park and Florida Bay will not fulfill their restoration potential without additional sources of fresh water.

Benefits to the State of Florida

As the recent National Academy of Sciences¹ report noted, with the acquisition of USSC land, Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) “planners now have an opportunity to consider restoration alternatives that previously were unavailable (e.g., vastly increased STAs, additional surface storage, increasing flow from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades ecosystem during wet periods). These restoration opportunities would not be available if other kinds of development replaced agriculture as a primary land use in the EAA.”

The ability to use extensive land in the EAA to store excess water during wet periods, clean it, and deliver it where and when it is needed most will serve South Florida's population during dry periods and protect coastal communities during wet seasons. This prospect will also greatly benefit Florida's largest lake, three invaluable coastal estuaries, and restore an ecologically beneficial hydrology to all portions of the Everglades ecosystem. This is an unprecedented and unparalleled opportunity to change Florida for the better by improving the quality of environment so critical to our state's economic survival.

¹ *Progress Toward Restoring the Everglades: The Second Biennial Review, 2008. National Research Council of the National Academies. The National Academies Press, Washington DC.*

Building on Florida and America's Investments

The purchase of USSC land is the latest in a series of decisions by federal and state officials to make the Everglades an internationally important conservation and restoration priority. From the creation of Everglades National Park and Big Cypress Preserve to the more recent efforts to clean up Lake Okeechobee and reinforce the Herbert Hoover Dike, Florida and the nation have consistently supported Everglades restoration. Audubon urges the public and decision-makers alike to support this land acquisition as a smart restoration decision, which will provide tremendous benefits for the public and for the natural system.

The Future of Farming

At present, sugarcane farming practices in the EAA release harmful levels of nutrients into the Everglades. Vast quantities of water are pumped into the fields during the dry season and are drained from the fields during the wet season. These extreme practices are incompatible with the goals of Everglades restoration. Everglades advocates have long urged that sugarcane farming be done in a sustainable way that produces less pollution and conserves both water and soil. As restoration projects are planned on the USSC lands, the state must require effective farming practices while prioritizing the protection of Florida's water resources.

The acquisition of USSC land, most of which will continue to be farmed into the near future, provides an ideal opportunity to develop more sustainable agricultural practices. Audubon will advocate that irrigation and drainage practices limit the harm currently caused to the environment and water resources. Audubon calls on the state to ensure that farming practices concerning water use and nutrient pollution are strengthened to thoroughly protect the health of the Everglades.

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