



Refocused U. S. Sugar Land Acquisition will Help Clean Up Everglades Water



The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has revised its proposal to purchase U.S. Sugar Corporation (U.S. Sugar) lands in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) to two parcels that will provide early opportunities to improve water quality.

The plan proposes the purchase of approximately 26,800 acres, 17,900 of which are citrus groves in Hendry County and 8,900 of which produce sugarcane in Palm Beach County. If the deal is approved, the land will be utilized to create new Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) or to improve the function of existing STAs. For the next ten years, the SFWMD will have the option to purchase an additional 153,200 acres. While U.S. Sugar will lease back this land until it is needed for water quality projects, thereby substantially defraying the costs of maintenance, there are no long-term lease requirements and the SFWMD can use the land to store and treat water as soon as projects are ready. The purchase will utilize funding already available, thereby preventing delays while financing is secured.



The purchase will help achieve ecological benefits

The ability to quickly convert 26,800 acres from sugar cane and citrus land into land used for water quality improvement is critical. The State of Florida has not yet been able to consistently meet the 10 parts per billion (ppb) phosphorus limit for water entering the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and Everglades National Park that was established to prevent ecological deterioration. The pollution emerging from sugar cane, other cropland, and urban runoff in and around the EAA is causing healthy Everglades sawgrass marshes and sloughs to convert into cattail-choked wasteland at a rate of between 2 and 9 acres per day.

The 8,900 acre tract in the Northeastern part of the EAA is ideally located either to be used directly to clean dirty water headed toward the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge or to trade for lands to expand STA 1 West, which currently treats water flowing to the Loxahatchee. The 17,900 acre parcel is located adjacent to STA 5 in the southwestern EAA. This STA is regularly overloaded by phosphorus-rich water entering the EAA from the C-139 Canal. This large tract of land can be used as a shallow reservoir to buffer STA 5 from overloading and also be the site for STA expansion.

By acquiring lands strategically aimed at improving the quality of water flowing to the Everglades, progress can be made to improve this pervasive water quality issue that continues to hinder Everglades restoration efforts and help to bring the ecosystem back from its current precarious tipping point.



The purchase will help address legal concerns

Drawing even more attention to the need for action, recent decisions in two separate federal lawsuits criticized the delays in achieving Everglades water quality standards, and these lawsuits are likely to require that immediate specific steps be taken. Audubon has been a party to one of these cases for almost two decades and will continue the fight to enforce the standards. With the purchase of these strategic lands from U.S. Sugar, real on-the-ground progress can be made to fulfill the legal requirements and improve the health of the ecosystem.

To further enhance water quality improvements, the former Talisman property adjacent to existing STAs 2, 3 and 4 should be utilized for shallow water storage and eventually converted into an STA, creating a huge water-treatment area that sends only clean water flowing south. In conjunction with the U.S. Sugar acquisition, this will allow the network of water storage, treatment and conveyance to provide clean water to the Everglades, which is essential for successful restoration.

Ensure the South Florida Water Management District hears your voice of support for the refocused EAA land acquisition.

Attend the public meeting

The proposed purchase must be approved at the next SFWMD Governing Board meeting at 11 a.m., Thursday, August 12 at the District Headquarters, B-1 Auditorium, 3301 Gun Club Road, West Palm Beach, FL 33406.

Audubon has long called for a comprehensive solution, including distributed storage and treatment north of Lake Okeechobee, the implementation of stringent Best Management Practices on agricultural lands to reduce phosphorus levels leaving farms, improving the performance of existing STAs, and the construction of at least 45,000 acres of new STAs to further clean water before it enters the Everglades. The U.S. Sugar purchase advances these goals because it includes lands that can be used to treat water from the highly polluted C-139 basin, and lands near STA 1W, which has the greatest need for expansion and improvement.

The purchase makes sense under current economic conditions

District revenues have fallen by \$150 million since 2008. This plan would use \$197,396,088 million in cash to immediately acquire the 26,800 acres and the ten-year option on additional lands. The ability to purchase land from a willing seller, using cash on hand, is the fastest way to enable water quality benefits to be realized. No debt-creating funding mechanisms, such as bonds, will be necessary to acquire the property.

Support the refocused U.S. Sugar land acquisition as a smart restoration milestone that will benefit the public and the health of the Everglades ecosystem.

