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Save Everglades, or the Glades?

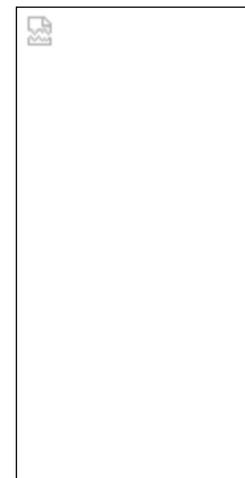
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Palm Beach Post Editorial Writer

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It's an exciting time for the proposed Glades inland port. It has a new name - inland logistics center - so people don't imagine cruise ships on Lake Okeechobee.

But there's more. The proposed buyout of U.S. Sugar means land - lots of it - in state ownership. What the inland port needs more than anything is cheap land. The state, through the South Florida Water Management District, could make that happen. And that's not all. Aside from 300 square miles of land, the U.S. Sugar sale includes a fully operational railroad. The South Central Florida Express encircles Lake Okeechobee and connects to the area's two main freight lines, the CSX and the FEC.



U.S. Sugar deal



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Land and rail are critical components to extend the reach of South Florida's ports - not just the smaller Port of Palm Beach but the larger Port Everglades in Broward County and Port of Miami. The idea in the Glades is: They're running out of warehouse and distribution land down there, so why not make it available up here? It's not hard to think that the \$1.75 billion deal to buy U.S. Sugar could help an "inland logistics center" provide a much-needed job base.

But the buyout also could get in the way. The purpose of the buyout is to save the Everglades. Water managers envision a series of cleansing marshes and reservoirs flooding the land south of Lake Okeechobee to the Broward County line.

And it just so happens that the most promising site for an inland port - er, "inland logistics center" - is right smack in the middle of the flood zone. A site owned by U.S. Sugar and the Fanjul family-run Florida Crystals is singled out in a July 3 letter from Port of Miami Director Bill Johnson as the site that "appears to offer the best benefit for the Port of Miami."

That's important because the Port of Miami is the best bet among South Florida ports to get a share of the new Asian import market that is expected to hit America's East Coast after the expansion of the Panama Canal in 2014. Think colossal ships loaded with goods destined for Wal-Mart and Home Depot.

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Last year, in a feasibility report by Cambridge Systematics Inc., U.S. Sugar and Florida Crystals "expressed an interest in discussing alternate land uses" beyond farming. That Florida Crystals contemplated giving up cane fields south of the lake is a positive for the water district; it signals Florida Crystals' interest in getting out. But the fact that the land likely will be flooded to save the Everglades is a "logistical" downer for the inland port.

A second potential site is owned by none other than U.S. Sugar. It's 3,500 acres east of the lake near Pahokee and it could soon belong to the water management district. But lo and behold, what do water managers say they would do with that land? They want to trade it for the Florida Crystals land south of the lake. If the Fanjuls won't trade, the U.S. Sugar buyout is in jeopardy.

But if the first site will be flooded and the second site will be traded, where does that leave the inland port? Site No. 3, the Pratt & Whitney facility west of Jupiter, is too small. Site No. 4, near Indiantown in Martin County, and Site 5, in Highlands County, remain eligible.

One site not mentioned in the feasibility study could make a lot of sense: Hendry County. If the deal goes through, U.S. Sugar leaves in six years, devastating Hendry's economy. One way the water district can keep the community alive is by helping to deliver a successful "inland logistics center."

But the port needs more than cheap land. A second, perhaps equally daunting challenge, is to step into this newfound restoration environment with a plan to lay more railroad tracks through a flood zone. To take advantage of all that shipping destined for Miami, the inland port would depend on a rail line linking South Bay and Miami along U.S. 27.

Environmentalists are likely to howl at the prospect of more rail, which can block water flow. But the Legislature has ordered a feasibility study. And rail may be the way to save Clewiston and the Palm Beach County lake towns of South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee.

The public is going to hear a lot in coming months about the inland port/logistics center. Without land and rail, however, the idea has about as much chance as cruise ships on Lake Okeechobee.

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