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My Word: Everglades deal sweet, indeed

By Judy Sanchez

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Orlando Sentinel columnist Mike Thomas echoes long-held beliefs of environmentalists and hydrologists in stating that acquiring U.S. Sugar Corp. lands for restoration is an investment worth making and that without this purchase "there will be no Everglades restoration" ("Restoring Glades: Sweet and sour," Tuesday).

U.S. Sugar is proud to partner with Gov. Charlie Crist and the South Florida Water Management District in its bold vision of restoring the Everglades. However, we must clarify a few points in the Thomas column regarding the initial land purchase.

In selecting lands for the initial acquisition, the water-management-district staff identified our citrus acreage as strategic land that could be most readily utilized for restoration-project construction.

Our 18,000-acre Southern Division Grove is adjacent to a current water-treatment project, which will be used to store and clean water from the C-139 basin. An additional 10,000 citrus acres are strategically located between Lake Okeechobee, Lake Hickpochee and the Caloosahatchee River. While water storage and treatment here primarily benefit the Caloosahatchee River and estuary, the lakes will benefit as well.

That's why the district selected 28,000 acres of citrus land in the first step. When the state wanted 85 percent of our citrus land, we required the state to buy it all because it would have made no sense to maintain our grove infrastructure for a few thousand acres.

Our Southern Gardens Citrus processing plant is the most efficient processing plant in the world. The current fruit supply for our processing plant is 80 percent from contract growers and 20 percent from our own groves. While harvesting fruit grown in our groves is normally more profitable, we plan to continue to operate the processing plant to capacity by getting additional fruit from local growers when the district is ready to construct restoration projects on that land.

Contrary to Thomas' claim that we want out of the citrus business, we intend to operate the citrus-processing plant at capacity and to continue to farm our citrus groves under lease with the water-management district.

As for the concern about Florida Crystals taking advantage of the district in future land swaps, district staff and scientists have concluded that even if the state is unable to complete land swaps in an economically feasible manner, U.S. Sugar lands can provide sufficient water storage and water treatment to benefit the entire Everglades ecosystem.

That's why Crist and the district consider this acquisition a historic opportunity to restore the Everglades and secure South Florida's water supply.

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