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Coskata moves forward on U.S., international projects

04/16/2009
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Illinois-based next-generation biofuels technology developer Coskata Inc. is moving forward with a number of potential opportunities in the southeastern U.S. and overseas.

According to Wes Bolsen, chief marketing officer and vice president of business development for Coskata, the company is progressing with plans to develop a 100 MMgy cellulosic ethanol plant in Clewiston, Fla., which would annually convert 1 million tons of sugarcane waste and bagasse into ethanol. The estimated \$400 million facility could begin production in 2012, pending USDA loan guarantees and a grant from the Florida Energy Office.

Negotiations between Coskata and U.S. Sugar are pending until the sugar company signs a land sale and use agreement with the state of Florida. In early April, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist announced a revised proposal to buy 72,500 acres from U.S. Sugar for \$530 million in an effort to restore the Everglades. The proposal is less than half of what was initially proposed in June 2008. That proposal called for 181,000 acres to be purchased at a price of \$1.34 billion.

Bolsen said the reduced acreage makes the U.S. Sugar and Coskata partnership even stronger. "There was a lot of worry about would there be enough acres for growing sugarcane to utilize in that 100 million gallon per year plant," he said. With the reduced acreage being turned over to the state, Bolsen added, it allows south Florida agriculture to continue farming the land, growing citrus and sugarcane, and operating the mill. In addition, it helps with restoration of the Florida Everglades and provides potential feedstock for a cellulosic biofuels facility.

THE VALUE OF WATER

04/15/2009

Fort Myers Florida Weekly

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THE VALUE OF WATER

what you see is not what you get, anymore

BY ROGER WILLIAMS rwilliams@floridaweekly.com

STAND ON THE LEE-COLLIER COUNTY LINE, POINT your nose upward, and levitate to a height of 50,000 feet.

From there, you'll be able to see not only a region of about one million people spread across 2,825 square miles of land — it stretches from the Ten Thousand Islands in the south to Babcock Ranch in the north, reaching inland from the Gulf coast about halfway to the Atlantic coast — but you will also see what appears to be a vast supply of water — salt, fresh and brackish. Every human being below you, and all their someday children, have an interest in that water. The interest is both physiological, since they can't live without drinking and using it, and economic, since the great demand of humanity on our water supply is about to increase its value dramatically, officials predict.

Nowadays when it comes to water, however, what you see is not usually what you get. Supplies must now come in greater volume from brackish and invisible sources ranging from 700 to 1,000 feet below the surface of the earth. That raises a couple of uncomfortable but reasonable questions: Is there enough water for us now, and will supplies be comfortably sufficient in 20 years?

In two decades, permits that allow coastal communities to use the deep wells will expire, in part because officials fear that such water supplies could run out.

So how much water do we really have?

"I wish I could answer that question," says Paul Matteauch, director of Collier County's water department, considered state-of-the-art in Florida. "Are we going to run out? The (short) answer is, 'No, we're not going to run out.'"

There's a big "but" hovering on the edge of the short answer, however.

"Southwest Florida, almost in total, started converting surface and shallow water sources into deeper, more stable water sources starting more than 10 years ago," says Chip Merriam, deputy executive director of the South Florida Water Management District. Mr. Merriam spent more than a decade working in Southwest Florida before he moved to the east coast headquarters of the district, the largest in Florida and one of the largest in the United States, an organization responsible for the water needs of 16 of Florida's 67 counties.

"The risk you have is that in the next decade or two, Florida's deep water is going to be more consistently available, and there is some level of finite. But to what degree, at this point, in some of those systems, we don't know."

As we find out, we're going to change our sources and supplies, and open our wallets, officials warn. In some places that could happen sooner rather than later. Cape Coral's government, for example, is wrestling with doubling its water rates over the next five years, from an average monthly bill of \$81 to \$158.

"I don't think people appreciate the value of water, yet. Water is going to get a lot more expensive as the years go by. And as more utilities are forced to build reverse osmosis plants, the cost will be passed onto the consumers," says Margie Hapke, a spokesperson for public utilities in Collier County.

"In 20 years," predicts Doug Meurer, director of Lee County Utilities, "we're going to stop using traditional (fresh) water sources, or at least use only what we've used so far, and not increase that use. And we'll get alternative water from two sources: first from brackish ground water, which requires reverse osmosis plants to process, and then from runoff that we can store.

Meanwhile, both in Lee and Collier, local officials are wrestling with less local or not-local-at-all officials to gain some control of the fresh water that remains.

In Lee County, commissioners and others are beseeching the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to release more water down the

Caloosahatchee River, in an effort to save returning grass beds and the fishery, which is showing increased signs of life for the first time in years.

In Collier County, the fresh water of the vast Picayune Strand, which is flanked on the east by the Fakahatchee Strand and on the west by the CREW Trust lands and Golden Gate, is now the subject of intense conflicts over its fresh water — which Collier officials want to use in quantities that don't destroy the environment, but which some others are reluctant to let them use.

Next week, Collier officials will conduct a very thorough, week-long empirical test to see just how much effect on the Picayune Strand they would have, by drawing down 6.5 million gallons of fresh water per day from wells there.

Whether or not they ultimately gain permission to use that water, they've reached a crossroads moment in water time.

In February, for the first time in history, Collier County used more brackish water from deep wells to provide clean drinking water to users, than fresh water. Not only that, but on an average water day, Collier meets the demands of its users with a supply that includes roughly a third fresh, a third brackish and a third reclaimed waste water, for irrigation, a statistic that many other counties, including Lee, can only envy, so far. (Cape Coral, again, is a pioneering exception within Lee — the city has used reclaimed water for irrigation for nearly 20 years.)

If that seems simple enough, it isn't, since no one in Collier County or in Lee County — which faces some problems Collier does not — are paying just for their own water anymore.

"We have to not only sustain a quality of life and address health and safety issues with public water supply in Collier, but we also have to sustain the Everglades," says Mr. Matteauch. "So we not only have human needs in Collier, but we have ecological needs and environmental needs."

Red tape and frustration

As different as Collier and Lee County may be in some respects, that problem is the same for both, as a sometimes rancorous meeting between board members of the South Florida Water Management District and a demanding public revealed last week, in St. Cloud.

Although officials had met there ostensibly to talk about water issues in central Florida, the subject became Southwest Florida, and the decision by Army Corps of Engineers officials not to release more water down the Caloosahatchee River from Lake Okeechobee.

The regular, limited squirts of fresh water stopped on March 5, although the lake depth remains above the minimum level sanctioned as the no-more-releases level, and Army Corps officials continued to let water out to meet the interests of the sugar industry and urban users to the south of the lake.

"What upset all of us from Lee County was that the dialogue wasn't about rationing users fairly, and sharing the burden (of

very dry conditions and water rationing), but about cutting Lee County off completely," says Commissioner Tammy Hall, who joined her fellow commissioner, Ray Judah, and others to argue the case for Lee County.

In effect, they said, the Army Corps allowed users on the east and south to continue using the lake's fresh water at 100 percent of their sanctioned capacity. But a seemingly arbitrary decision ended the supply to the Caloosahatchee.

That would have two effects, they argued: It took away a water supply that could extend the life of the river's fishery for years, and it put tremendous pressure on a water treatment plant at Olga, the only one in the Lee system that draws fresh water directly from the river, and supplies it after traditional filtration and cleaning — there is no reverse osmosis technology in place at Olga to filter out salts — to about 20,000 homes, or perhaps 50,000 people.

When fresh water doesn't come down the river in moderate quantities, the salt levels build so high that utilities officials have to notify every household, warning those whose health requires careful monitoring of salt intake not to use the water, says Mr. Meurer, the director. Then officials have to divert water from other systems into the area, which is not only cumbersome, but could potentially cause salt to infiltrate other systems.

"We want the Corps to allow us to receive a minimum release of 650 cubic feet per second," says Mr. Judah, the Lee commissioner. "That translates to a quarter inch off the lake in a week, which is negligible in terms of drawing down the lake level. Why are they picking on the Caloosahatchee and not requiring sacrifices from the sugar industry and others?"

It was a question the Corps couldn't answer, because the only Corps representative to attend the meeting was a public relations person, who read a letter from a senior Corps official — a colonel — into the record. The letter praised various groups for working together.

"If we have to moderate or work with you, we want to do that," Commissioner Hall told the board members of the South Florida Water Management District, who sat silently listening to her message — a message she was delivering to the Corps, through the elected officials on the board, and the hired officials sitting in the audience.

"We also want to have an understanding of what everybody else is doing.

We are not coming here saying, 'Keep us at this level, we're looking for a salinity level, not a volume level, and that's all we care about.'"

Instead, she said, "were looking for that fairness. I don't want to be put in a position to read about how this is an issue between the south and the west. We're beyond those days."

As if to prove that point, a Broward County board member of the South Florida Water Management District — elected to represent the interests of water users south of the lake — echoed the arguments of Lee officials.

"The Caloosahatchee River should not be singled out for (water) reduction," said, Shannon Estenoz, the water district board member.

Water district officials, meanwhile, are faced with the unenviable need to represent a variety of water interests across the 16-county kingdom for which they're responsible — urban users, agricultural users, and developers, as well as the "environment." That now largely means the vast and complex plan, with a newly revised strategy to buy sugar cane fields announced this month by Gov. Charlie Crist, to restore the Everglades.

In the political, economic and environmental process to decide who gets what water from the Picayune Strand in eastern Collier County, or the Caloosahatchee River in Lee — or many other places — the Army Corps holds sway, playing a key and sometimes seemingly arbitrary role in those decisions.

The Corps' decisions are loosely leashed only with an indistinct and ill-defined requirement that the Army Corps listen and weigh the recommendations of local or regional officials, and the water management district officials, as they manage the lake.

"If we want to help the Caloosahatchee, which everybody does, our involvement is to make some kind of recommendations to the Corps.... But they are the ultimate authority in what they will do or not do," said Carol Wehle, the executive director of the South Florida Water Management District.

Charles Dauray, a board member of the Southwest Florida Water Management District who represents Collier, Lee and Hendry counties, reacted with apparent displeasure.

"Carol, I would like to see a readdressing of this issue," he said. "Taxpayers, stakeholders, deserve better than confusion at the top. We need to be more clear as to how these decisions are made. It's very sloppy right now. The result is confusion, which transcends the real heart of issue. The process itself needs to be sharpened up."

Marching to the tune of two drummers: technology, money

Already, though, the technology and forward-looking energy of utilities officials in both Collier and Lee has been sharpened significantly.

In Lee County, one of the key requirements for long-term survival is the construction of storage facilities for runoff — especially the much-ballyhooed C-43 reservoir awaiting government funding so it can be built in Hendry County. That will allow the storage of huge quantities of water to be used not only for fresh water releases downstream into Lee, but for agricultural uses, which remain exceedingly important in Southwest Florida, officials say.

Commissioner Hall predicts that construction on the new reservoir — now in the Congressional pipeline for funding, she says — could be under way not this year but in the following year or two.

She and other Lee officials have traveled to Washington, D.C. to lobby for the project, and sooner rather than later.

In Collier, meanwhile, like in Lee, officials still hope to use as

much fresh water as they can while they continue to prepare for a future when the fresh sources are even more strictly limited, or just plain absent.

One problem with surface water (either fresh or salt) from certain sources, says Mr. Matteauch, the Collier County water director, is that it varies so much in quality, almost on a day-to-day basis. As a result, technicians are not easily able to set up water plants that dependably keep it clean all the time, since the requirements for cleaning water can change dramatically with the content of the water.

And many people reasonably wonder why officials can't just begin siphoning and cleaning water from the Gulf of Mexico.

"The first source one would think of is the Gulf," says Mr. Matteauch. "I got a letter not long ago literally addressed like this: 'To The Idiot Who Runs the Water Supply for Collier County.' The letter said we should be using reverse osmosis and desalinating salty water (the Gulf).

"Well, we are using reverse osmosis, but we didn't go to the Gulf because it has some other inherent problems. It's a surface supply, so the quality changes with the wind direction and the flow of rivers into it. That makes the water much more difficult and more expensive to treat. There are two reasons. One, because it changes so much from day to day, and two because it has a much higher salt content than the brackish water we use from the deep wells."

The salt, he explains, is not merely sodium chloride or table salt, but a variety of salts, including calcium carbonates and magnesium carbonates, which are metals or — as water engineers define them — dissolved solids.

In the underground wells, water quality doesn't change from day to day, and they contain only 15 percent of the dissolved solids that are found floating in Gulf water.

Collier has a singularly large capacity for using brackish water treated by reverse osmosis, and so do some communities in Lee — Cape Coral, which pioneered the technology in Southwest Florida, and Sanibel, for example.

Here's how it works, and why it's more expensive, explains Mr. Matteauch.

"By pressure, you drive water with the total dissolved solids across a membrane. There are two streams of water that come off the membrane in a plant — one is very high-quality drinking water, and the other is very high in all of those total dissolved solids. We call it a concentrate stream, high in salts. That we have to get rid of."

Creating those two streams of water requires a high amount of electric energy — a relatively high horsepower motor — to pump the water across the membrane.

And another reason for the expense is that the concentrate stream has to be pumped back into a well 3,100 feet below the surface. That well is permitted by the Army Corps of Engineers because the amount of dissolved solids in the water at that depth

is roughly equal to the concentrate stream being pumped into it.

"That is a very expensive well, but we have to have it," Mr. Matteauch explains. "You start out drilling at 48 inches diameter, and you get to an 18- or 20-inch bore hole at about three-fifths of a mile."

But the entire process of reverse osmosis in the use of deep wells is about 75 percent efficient, he adds. "So for every 100 gallons of water I pull out of the ground, I can get 75 gallons of highquality water to pump to my customers, and 25 gallons to pump to the deep injection well."

If he were to use water from the Gulf, he'd get about one gallon of drinking water and one gallon of unusable concentrate, he estimates.

The same thing is true in Lee County, and officials across the region are quick to realize a 21st-century water truth: People are going to have to pay for new technologies that use new sources of water.

"Having come from western water law and operations (Colorado), I see that a lot of issues Florida faces are similar," says Doug Meurer, the Lee County utilities director.

"You could say that the cheap water has been harvested, and now we're looking at water supply management. Enhanced technology and different management of ALL water sources. We can no longer just rely solely on surface water or ground water."

And those who want to use surface or fresh water may well be relying on the new Lake Okeechobee rule wherever they are, suggests Mr. Merriam, the Army Corps official.

"The Lake O rule says that users should have not just an allocation for water, but a live demand. And they can keep that as long as the land use, or the demand, is in place," he explains.

So, for example, if an agricultural user was once allocated 1,000 feet per second of water replenishment from Lake Okeechobee at certain times of the year, but he only uses 200 feet per second, his allocation will be changed to reflect his real need.

"There's a three-pronged test," Mr. Merriam says. "Your use has to be a reasonable request, it has to be beneficial and it cannot impact other users. So what you're demanding is what you need. And the benefit is kind of a public interest test."

Public interest, in other words, is the future and purpose of water.

A river runs through it

If history, per se, is the work of humans, then the modern history of the Caloosahatchee River begins with the Calusa Indians, who are not only not modern, but extinct.

What those humans did, however, was extend the winding old ribbon of water all the way out to Lake Okeechobee, says Chip Merriam, the deputy executive director of the South Florida Water Management District. In effect, they ran the river right through our lives, since we are now inextricably linked to Lake Okeechobee by the Caloosahatchee.

A band of hardy pioneers put their own stamp on the work of the Calusa more than a century ago, and then between about 1932 and the mid-1960s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completed the modern history of the river, dredging a deep channel and straightening it.

"Florida's history is, 'Let's find ways to drain the swamp,'" says Mr. Merriam. "It's taken us several decades to realize that the environmental component shouldn't have been neglected. And how we're spending billions to reverse that."

We're also trying to figure out just what the river should be, and what it will take to make it that way.

"The river will never not play a vital role in the economy and lifestyle here, but that role changes," says Tammy Hall, a Lee County commissioner. "When Edison was here, it was a goods and services road. Now it's gone from a commerce role to an environmental and quality-of-life role. And now that we're hooked up to Lake O, we will never get off it. And we need those fresh water flushes for our livelihood."

The river has begun to come back from its near-death experience early in the decade. Grass beds and fisheries are showing greater signs of life than they have in years, officials say, but the river faces competitive conflicts with its own mother, if you will — the big lake.

Carol Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District, put it like this to her board of directors at a meeting in St. Cloud last week.

"You have two MFL (minimum flow) considerations which conflict: a minimum flow for the Caloosahatchee that would make you err on the side of sending more water, and a minimum flow in the lake, which would have you err on the side of keeping more water in the lake. So the MFLs are in competition for same volume of water."

It wasn't what people in Southwest Florida wanted to hear, and she didn't propose a solution.

Mr. Merriam, later asked to provide a report card on the river's performance, expressed ambivalence.

"One of the difficulties is that if you look at the river and its purpose now — flood protection and commerce — it does a very good job. But if you look at it and ask, 'Is it meeting the needs of an estuary?' Then it's not doing a very good job."

Even as recently as the 1950s and '60s, he recounts, the river was a "meandering ox-bow system, with low-level waterfalls. There was a lot of friction in the system, so that when it rained over Lake Okeechobee and over the entire basin, 1,000 square miles, that water took a significantly long period of time to very gently flow out to historic Estero Bay and into the Gulf."

The friction, in effect, cleaned the water and made it a valuable, inexpensive source of fresh water for users that also inspired a healthy ecology all the way into the Gulf.

"When it's channelized, and the friction is taken away, then the

traditionally slow-moving water gets out of the

way very quickly, and allows those upstream to construct ditches, and push more water more quickly," Mr. Merriam says.

That's the tradition.

What about now?

"Yes, we can make the Caloosahatchee much better than it is," he says. "The goals and targets articulated are within our reach. The difficulty at this point, especially in a tight economy, is how to establish the priorities."

And that contemporary process — to establish the priorities and get something done — is creating a new history, one bound to prove distinctly different than the old history begun unknowingly by the Calusa Indians.

Kirk Fordham: U.S. Sugar's land deal saves jobs, restores Everglades

04/15/2009

Orlando Sentinel

Fordham, Kirk

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The world's largest ecosystem restoration took a decisive step forward when Gov. Charlie Crist announced an amended proposal to purchase more than 70,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land for Everglades restoration.

The governor's proposal provides land to address the biggest water-quality problems in the Everglades.

Virtually everyone agrees that the Everglades needs to be saved. After all, the spectacular River of Grass provides the source of drinking water for millions of Floridians. Tens of thousands of jobs in the fishing, boating, tourism and real-estate industries depend on a clean and healthy Everglades.

Families and children's groups enjoy the dozens of public parks within the Everglades as an escape from our busy urban centers.

Scores of rare and endangered species -- from the Florida panther to the Southern bald eagle make their homes in the Everglades. Allowing this one-of-a-kind ecosystem to disappear would have devastating consequences.

The effort to acquire U.S. Sugar's land for Everglades restoration began with an announcement by the state to purchase 187,000 acres. This was later followed by an agreement to acquire just over 180,000 acres.

The current agreement has been altered to reflect tighter budgets and leaner economic times and would allow the state to acquire 72,500 acres. It provides those who work in the sugar-growing communities south of Lake Okeechobee an opportunity to remain

in business for the foreseeable future. This transaction will offer the state new opportunities to clean up polluted run-off from sugar farms and urban areas before it flows into the Everglades and stop the back-pumping of contaminated water from cane fields into Lake Okeechobee.

In addition, the contract's 10-year option gives the South Florida Water Management District an opportunity to purchase a remaining 107,500 acres -- practically all the land needed for restoration. Special interests that have a financial interest in killing this critical land acquisition argue the purchase will block the completion of other restoration projects. These charges are simply untrue. This land acquisition is the foundation of a visionary plan providing opportunities to sustain our water supply, lessen the impact of Lake Okeechobee's polluted discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie rivers and restore Florida Bay.

Finalizing an agreement to acquire land south of Lake Okeechobee to help the ailing Glades is a critical step forward. The existing state-federal Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and the Northern Everglades program to restore and protect Lake Okeechobee, the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and their estuaries can finally be made to work in a way that benefits the communities that depend on clean water and recovered fisheries.

Should this transaction fail, U.S. Sugar Corp. could auction its land holdings to other willing buyers who are already pushing dangerous plans to build landfills, rock mines and massive commercial developments in the middle of the Everglades.

Imagine how difficult and expensive the state's job of acquiring land for restoration in those circumstances would be and what irreversible abuses to the land could be perpetuated. No one who is truly concerned about a healthy Everglades and the economic benefits it provides to diverse industries such as agriculture, tourism, fishing, and boating would want to see that happen.

This historic land acquisition is an opportunity for us all. It requires vision -- something that was woefully lacking before Crist suggested this approach to Everglades restoration.

We applaud Crist and U.S. Sugar for negotiating a creative, flexible and more-affordable solution to improving our water quality, saving the Everglades and preserving the jobs that are dependent on its survival.

COLUMN: What they think
Opinion & Commentary

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State's revised Everglades land purchase a good compromise

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Bradenton Herald

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Maybe for Gov. Charlie Crist the third time in his dance with U.S. Sugar will be the charm. The latest version of the governors proposal to buy land for Everglades projects is much improved over the previous two offers. The price is about a third of the \$1.75 billion first offer, and it buys less than half of the original 180,000 acres. Now, the deal is affordable a concession to the recession and some of the unattractive features have been removed or changed for the better.

Heres how the deal now stands: For \$533 million, the South Florida Water Management District gets 72,500 acres, with an option to buy 107,500 acres within 10 years at fair-market value at the time of acquisition. A portion of the land, 40,500 acres, will be leased back to U.S. Sugar at \$150 per acre. This will allow sugar farming to continue for at least seven years. Some of this land, about 3,000 acres, will be set aside for economic development projects in nearby communities.

Obviously, the revised version benefits both U.S. Sugar and the state. The company gets a partnership with the state and subsidies for three years, and possibly longer. This version of the deal is for land only and doesnt include other property such as the sugar mill and refinery. So, the company gets cash with which it can pay down debt on the properties. For the state, the \$150-per-acre lease-back is much closer to the true value of the land. The state was getting rooked on the lease arrangement in the previous deals, which priced the land at \$50 per acre.

Premature on inland port

04/13/2009

Palm Beach Post

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Sugar grower Florida Crystals wants to diversify. The company argues that land next to its mill south of Lake Okeechobee is the best place to build an inland port to serve the three South Florida seaports.

A site selection competition is expected this year. To enhance its bid, Florida Crystals wants the Palm Beach County Commission today to designate 318 acres for the first stage of a warehousing hub that could expand to 3,500 acres. To avoid charges of favoritism, the commission also would designate about 100,000 acres for a similar change.

What passes for planning in Palm Beach County these days is politicking. The purpose of these moves is to help Florida Crystals get the inland port. The argument is jobs. The port could create 22,000 jobs, a study says, and commissioners don't want those jobs in Hendry or other counties.

The inland port has picked up important supporters, including Gov. Crist, because it could offset job losses if the state buys U.S. Sugar land. But the buyout is aimed at restoring the Everglades, and the inland port could harm that goal.

Florida Crystals insists that Everglades restoration will have to work around the company's site - the mill, a sugar refinery, packaging center and power plant - because it's in the way and too expensive to move. Good planning, however, would dictate that commissioners do what Florida Crystals is doing: Contemplate a time when sugar farming won't be lucrative. The mill then wouldn't be the obstacle to Everglades restoration. The immovable object would be the inland port.

While Crystals argues that the industrial area off U.S. 27 south of South Bay is the perfect site for warehousing, environmentalists counter that it is the worst site because it is in the path of historic water flow between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Commissioners refused to consider restoration last year when they approved a 7,500-acre rock mine on U.S. Sugar land to the north. Simply changing the land designation increased the value of that land by at least \$200 million, even though U.S. Sugar now is in court to terminate its rock-mining plans.

The cane fields around Lake Okeechobee have many sites that could accommodate trucks, rail and warehouses for an inland port but few in the path of the "River of Grass." For commissioners to make a decision now based on the aspirations of a single owner, without considering regional water needs, would be a mistake. As with rock mining, that mistake would prove costly to undo.

Palm Beach County commissioners move forward with industrial hub plan

04/13/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

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Hope for job creation trumped environmental concerns Monday as Palm Beach County commissioners increased their push to attract new industry to land considered for Everglades restoration.

The county wants to create an industrial distribution center that would link coastal ports from Miami to Palm Beach County, delivering cargo to and from the coast via truck routes and rail lines crisscrossing the state and linking with routes to the rest of the country.

In Monday's vote, the County Commission designated 99,500 acres that includes South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee as the area to look for potential sites for the industrial distribution center, referred to as an inland port, near Lake Okeechobee.

Sugar producer Florida Crystals became the first in that targeted area to benefit, when commissioners gave initial approval to changing growth guidelines to allow the inland port on 318-acres owned by the company. Florida Crystals proposes building the inland port beside the company's Okeelanta sugar mill and power plant.

Other counties around Lake Okeechobee are also competing for the industrial hub. The county's votes Monday were an effort to

improve its chances of landing the inland port and the jobs expected to follow.

Long before the nation's current economic slump, South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee suffered from high unemployment. Community leaders Monday said the inland port could help.

One of the proposed rail lines for the inland port would stretch from South Bay to Hialeah along U.S. 27.

"The Glades needs economic stimulus. Period," Commissioner Burt Aaronson said. "We have to try."

The county's proposal and the Florida Crystals plan still must come back before the commission for final approval in August. State transportation regulators and port officials will decide the location of the inland port.

Environmental groups opposed the county's actions, saying the county could prematurely open agricultural land to industrial development and get in the way of Everglades restoration.

Gov. Charlie Crist proposes buying 72,500 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. farmland for \$533 million for Everglades restoration. The state would also have the option to buy another 107,500 acres.

Farmland that was once part of the Everglades would be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows to the Everglades. The 107,500 acres overlap with the land included in the county's 99,500 acres suggested for inland port sites.

"[It] doesn't make sense," said Drew Martin of the Sierra Club. "This is where the heart of the Everglades began."

Glades community leaders say economic development is just as important as environmental restoration.

"You perhaps will never get this opportunity again to have [economic development] out in the Glades," Belle Glade Mayor Steve Wilson said.

Commissioner Karen Marcus cast the only vote against the county's inland port proposal and Florida Crystals' bid, calling them "premature."

Other landowners among the 99,500 acres targeted by the county could still join Florida Crystals in trying to land the inland port. But Commissioner Jess Santamaria said the commission's vote was "in fact favoring one landowner."

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'Inland port,' Fanjul land change get Palm Beach County's initial OK despite environmental objection

04/13/2009

Palm Beach Post - Online

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WEST PALM BEACH County commissioners this afternoon gave initial approval to two land-use changes that could allow an industrial complex to be built near the southern end of Lake Okeechobee.

Palm Beach County is competing with several other counties to be chosen as the location for an 'inland port' that would be a warehousing and distribution center serving South, Southwest and Central Florida's seaside ports, including the Port of Palm Beach. 'We can get into the posture where we are at least facing the possibility of having an inland port if all the stars align,' County Commissioner Shelley Vana said.

Both votes were 6-1, with Commissioner Karen Marcus dissenting. Environmentalists had urged the commissioners to delay, saying the changes threaten to hamper Everglades restoration. Today's action could give Florida Crystals Corp. a leg up in becoming the spot of choice.

Commissioners voted to allow 318 acres of the sugar powerhouse's farmland near South Bay to be used for industrial development. They also changed the county's land use plan to create an industrial designation for nearly 100,000 acres surrounding and including Florida Crystals' land. 'We are in fact favoring one landowner today,' said County Commissioner Jess Santamaria, whose district includes the land in question.

Environmentalists urged commissioners to wait until the South Florida Water Management District completes its scaled-back purchase of 72,500 acres from U.S. Sugar. The debate had echoes of a similar controversy a year earlier, in which the commissioners overrode environmental groups' objections to approve more than 10,000 acres of rock mines south of the lake.

Marcus dissented in part over similar concerns today, calling the vote 'premature.' But several commissioners said they trusted that the port wouldn't be built if it will cause restoration problems. 'We are for Everglades restoration, but we also are for economic development,' Commissioner Burt Aaronson said.

A port would create jobs in the Glades that are sorely needed, said South Bay Commissioner Linda Johnson. 'The Glades needs economic stimulation. Period,' Aaronson said. About 20 residents from South Bay, Belle Glade and Pahokee showed their support by wearing shirts that read: 'Save our jobs, Save our Community, Inland port in the Glades.' 'I'm tired, tired of everything coming around us,' said Belle Glade resident Barbara King Pittrell. 'We want to grow too.'

Both land-use changes now goes to the state's Department of

Community Affairs for review, before commissioners can make them official after holding a final public hearing in August.

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EDITORIAL Pruning 'Glades deal

04/13/2009

Tampa Tribune

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Apr. 13--It may be a blessing that the eroding economy claimed Gov. Charlie Crist's ambitious plan to buy 180,000 acres for Everglades' restoration.

Many details about the deal to pay U.S. Sugar \$1.75 billion for the land were questionable. It was not clear the state needed that much acreage and its agreement to lease the farmland back to U. S. Sugar for seven years at bargain-basement prices made many suspect this was more a sweetheart deal for the sugar company than a historic environmental feat.

Now Crist has come back with a less ambitious arrangement that is also less worrisome. The state would buy only 72,500 acres for \$533 million. The lesser amount should allow the South Florida Water Management District to fund the acquisition without raising property taxes. The original proposal called for tax rates to remain the same, but falling property values made that impossible.

The state will lease about 40,000 acres to U.S. Sugar for seven years, but the company would pay \$150 an acre, not the suspicious \$50-an-acre called for in the first plan.

The 72,500 acres won't be enough, but it is plenty for the state to begin serious and meaningful restoration work.

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