

SFWMD

Compiled by: South Florida Water Management District
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U.S. Sugar Board Approves Amended Two-Step SFWMD Land Acquisition

05/11/2009
usagnet

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North Dakota Ag News Headlines

North Dakota Ag Connection - 05/11/2009

The board of directors of the U.S. Sugar Corporation approved the amended contract terms for the South Florida Water Management District's acquisition of the company's land in two affordable phases that enable the company to continue its operations.

'Our board approved the revised acquisition approach implementing Governor Crist's bold vision for our property. While the vision and goal remain unchanged, the economy dictated this more affordable approach,' said Robert Coker, senior vice president, public affairs.

'We believe this historic acquisition will still provide great benefits for the environment and a fair value for our company,' Coker said. 'Our board approval brings us one step closer to getting this done. The next step is the review and approval of the amended contract by the Governing Board of the SFWMD next week.'

Under the amended terms, the SFWMD initially would acquire nearly 73,000 acres of the company's land for approximately \$536 million with a 10-year option to acquire the remaining 107,000 acres. U.S. Sugar would continue to farm the property through a 7-year lease that may be extended under certain circumstances. The SFWMD is in the bond validation process in Florida Circuit Court. The acquisition is scheduled to close within 90 days of bond validation.

'This two-step approach provides a greater degree of certainty for our businesses, for our employees and also for our communities by keeping our farming and processing operations viable for the foreseeable future,' said Robert Coker, senior vice president, public affairs.

Coker said that under the amended agreement, U.S. Sugar will lease back the cane land for \$150 per gross acre for the initial seven-year period. The SFWMD can take nearly 33,000 acres of citrus land with one year's notice. The SFWMD also may take up to 10,000 acres of cane land at any time in the first ten years with a two-year notice for approved and funded projects. Up to 3,000 acres of transition lands within or adjacent to local municipalities will be made available for development or community projects.

'Now it is up to the Governing Board to approve the contract and move forward to implement Governor Crist's vision. We are optimistic that they will,' Coker said.

North Dakota sugarbeet farmers have an interest in U.S. Sugar.

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U.S. Sugar Board approves two-step land acquisition

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Amended terms of purchase protect rural jobs and environment

Special to the REPORTER

On Friday, the Board of Directors of the U.S. Sugar Corporation approved the amended contract terms for the South Florida Water Management District's acquisition of the company's land in two affordable phases that enable the company to continue its operations.

'Our board approved the revised acquisition approach implementing Governor Crist's bold vision for our property,' said Robert Coker, senior vice president, public affairs. 'While the vision and goal remain unchanged, the economy dictated this more affordable approach.'

Under the amended terms, the South Florida Water Management District initially would acquire nearly 73,000 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s land for approximately \$536 million with a 10-year option to acquire the remaining 107,000 acres. U.S. Sugar would continue to farm the property through a seven-year lease that may be extended under certain circumstances.

'We believe this historic acquisition will still provide great benefits for the environment and a fair value for our company,' Coker said. 'Our board approval brings us one step closer to getting this done. The next step is the review and approval of the amended contract by the governing board of the South Florida Management District next week.'

The water management district is in the bond validation process in Florida Circuit Court. The acquisition is scheduled to close within 90 days of bond validation.

'This two-step approach provides a greater degree of certainty for our businesses, for our employees and also for our communities by keeping our farming and processing operations viable for the foreseeable future,' he added.

In addition, Coker noted that under the amended agreement, U.S. Sugar will lease back the cane land for \$150 per gross acre for the initial seven-year period. The water management district can take nearly 33,000 acres of citrus land with one year's notice.

The district also may take up to 10,000 acres of cane land at any time in the first 10 years with a two-year notice for approved and funded projects. Up to 3,000 acres of transition lands within or adjacent to local municipalities will be made available for development or community projects.

'Now it is up to the governing board to approve the contract and move forward to implement Governor Crist's vision,' Coker said.

'We are optimistic that they will.'

No deal without focus on main goal: Everglades restoration

05/11/2009

Palm Beach Post

Mike Collins

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I have been hopeful with each version of the U.S. Sugar deal that we'd end up with a plan that would enhance existing Everglades restoration efforts at an efficient cost. Unfortunately, the latest iteration - once again void of purpose or business sense - has left me disappointed.

Yes, the present opportunity is monumental; the availability of land and focus on restoration is greater than before. But the process, which was flawed from the start, has continued down the wrong path. The district - the purchaser itself - was sidelined from the onset. Staff were basically handed a gift-wrapped box and told to accept it without looking inside. Why have we allowed U.S. Sugar to dictate the terms of Everglades restoration, and why have we bowed to the company's take-it-or-leave-it conditions, which have left us purchasing citrus and development lands that will provide minimal benefit, if any, to the Everglades?

For example, no explanation exists as to why the district is expected to pay top dollar for citrus acreage. The plan calls for purchasing 32,000 acres at about \$6,200 an acre. We have been told that only 12,000 of those acres can be used, and we can sell the remainder at a par with the grossly inflated purchase price. Adjacent citrus land is available at a lower price with no willing buyers. The plan's land usage doesn't add up either. The district would retain an option to buy U.S. Sugar's remaining 107,000 acres, but no plan or study outlines why the land would be needed.

The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) was developed almost a decade ago as an open process. Florida has invested more than \$2 billion in CERP, and we have yet to complete a single project. If we want to address restoration enhancement needs, let's do it within the blueprint we've already painstakingly developed.

With the U.S. Sugar deal, we don't have a clear-cut plan, and the wrong lands are being purchased. Instead of using the money to buy citrus and development land, why not use it to acquire more land in what Gov. Crist called "the sweet spot" where a flowway could be developed? We are voting on another bad business deal that will not get us where we need to be. It also may leave the district unable to provide such core services as water supply and flood protection. Let's negotiate a deal with Everglades restoration at its heart.

MIKE COLLINS

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Editor's note: Mike Collins is a member of the South Florida Water Management District Governing Board.

Land could be last, best hope for saving entire ecosystem

05/11/2009

Palm Beach Post

Thom Rumberger

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The Everglades Trust and expert environmental scientists long have advocated land acquisition in the Everglades Agricultural Area as the best option to fulfill Florida's commitment to Everglades restoration. For decades, acquiring that land was an impossible dream. No one would stand up to Big Sugar interests that cared more about profit than preservation.

Fortunately, Gov. Crist had the courage to bring the biggest sugar player to the table and raise the stakes. With that stand, we are on the threshold of reclaiming large parts of the historic Everglades, making U.S. Sugar a partner rather than an opponent, and providing for a future of clean water, a renewed tourist industry and hope for new industries for the communities and people surrounding Lake Okeechobee.

The terms of the new acquisition allow the state to acquire 73,000 acres now with options on the remaining 107,000 acres. The \$536 million price is below the land's appraised value, and U.S. Sugar lease rates have been tripled. New terms also provide an opportunity to exchange land for property that will reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades and, hopefully, will encourage participation by one of the remaining objectors, Florida Crystals.

Opponents claim that the purchase will block completion of other restoration projects. These charges are untrue. This acquisition will allow other designs to be improved and incorporated into projects that benefit the entire Everglades ecosystem. The land being acquired first is strategically located for projects that can be designed and built quickly. One of Florida's most highly regarded hydrologists, Tom Van Lent, believes that even in smaller, more affordable phases, buying large tracts of U.S. Sugar property remains the best, most cost-effective method.

One criticism is the inclusion of 30,000-plus acres of citrus land. That acquisition alone will provide 18,000 acres for water storage and treatment of pollution in the C-139 Basin. Another 3,500 acres in the S-4 basin will reduce back-pumping from sugar cane fields that poisons the lake.

If we let this chance slip away, U.S. Sugar could auction its vast land holdings to buyers who already are pushing dangerous plans for landfills, rock mines and massive commercial developments in the middle of the Everglades. We urge the opponents to join us in support of this purchase.

THOM RUMBERGER

Tallahassee

Editor's note: Thom Rumberger is chairman of the Everglades Trust.

Everglades land deal Includes \$50 million option to buy more

05/12/2009

Sun Sentinel - Online

Andy Reid

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Gov. Charlie Crist's Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. comes with a \$50 million gamble for South Florida taxpayers.

Included in the \$536 million price for 73,000 acres is a \$50 million provision that would for three years freeze the per-acre-price on buying an additional 107,000 acres of U.S. Sugar farmland.

Because of the state's struggling economy, Crist twice scaled down his proposed deal with U.S. Sugar, which started in June with a \$1.75 billion bid to buy all of U.S. Sugar's land, sugar mill and other facilities.

The new deal, facing a Thursday deadline, calls for buying an initial 73,000 acres and includes a 10-year option to buy the other 107,000 acres. The South Florida Water Management District would buy the land and use it to restore water flows from Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades. The district plans to borrow the money and South Florida taxpayers will pay off the long-term debt.

The \$50 million provision gives the district the exclusive option to pay the same \$7,400-per-acre price for the additional 107,000 acres if the district buys the land within three years. The district, which leads Everglades restoration, could still buy the land after three years, but would have to pay appraised value.

Strike a deal within three years for the additional land and it turns out to be a cost savings to taxpayers, said Ruth Clements, the district's director of land acquisition.

But if the district can't afford to go beyond the initial 73,000-acre land buy within three years, U.S. Sugar gets to keep the \$50 million.

U.S. Sugar's board of directors approved the amended contract for the \$536 million deal Friday.

On Monday, the district board was still debating whether the agency can afford the 73,000-acre purchase. A vote is expected as soon as Wednesday.

Long-time board member Michael Collins questions the cost, as well as paying for the option to buy more land at the same price.

Collins said he doubts there are other buyers 'stupid enough' to pay what the district is paying. 'I don't see this land going anywhere,' Collins said. The deal 'just doesn't seem to provide protection and benefit to the taxpayers.' Board member Shannon Estenoz said the \$50 million provision helps the district lock up land that could otherwise be sold to other buyers.

South Florida needs land south of Lake Okeechobee to store water and boost supplies, Estenoz said. 'There is a very real risk of the [Everglades Agricultural Area] transforming over time,' said Estenoz, who represents Broward County Click here for restaurant inspection reports. 'The value to the taxpayer becomes obvious.' Taking advantage of the \$50 million provision likely requires striking a deal with U.S. Sugar's rival, Florida Crystals.

District officials said they would use the option for the remaining 107,000 acres to strike a deal with one or more buyers interested in acquiring some of U.S. Sugar's land.

That would allow the district to get a portion of the 107,000 acres needed for restoration or swap for land more strategically located between the lake and the Everglades. Florida Crystals owns much of that land.

Florida Crystals has gone to court to fight the district's financing plan for the U.S. Sugar deal, even as the company held on-again-off-again talks with the district and the governor's office about U. S. Sugar land.

Florida Crystals still questions the state's deal with U.S. Sugar but remains open to talking with the district about potential land swaps, company Vice President Gaston Cantens said. 'It's not like people are knocking down the door to buy that land,' Cantens said. 'I'm not sure what \$50 million gets them.' Andy Reid can be reached at abreid@SunSentinel.com or 561-228-5504.

THE EVERGLADES New Everglades land deal could ease restoration

05/12/2009
Miami Herald
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If water managers approve the smaller, cheaper version of Gov. Charlie Crist's Big Sugar land deal Wednesday, they won't be done dealing.

New tweaks in the \$536 million offer to buy 73,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. would give water managers more time and flexibility to cut follow-up land deals -- most likely with rival grower Florida Crystals -- to improve Everglades restoration projects.

"This puts us in a much better bargaining position in any future negotiations," said Carol Ann Wehle, executive director of the South Florida Water Management District.

The district's governing board, which met Monday to discuss the deal and must approve it, is expected to vote Wednesday or Thursday.

While approval isn't a lock, criticism has eased since the governor -- bowing to a declining economy and rising political pressure -- announced in April that he had scaled back his original \$1.34 billion bid to acquire 181,000 acres of U.S. Sugar's farmland. The new deal reduced the land, and cost, by more than half.

"We're really close to doing the right thing for the right reasons, but I am concerned about the timing of it," said Charles Dauray, a board member from Southwest Florida who had voted against the earlier deal.

Beyond the bottom line, other key changes were hammered out during contract negotiations since Crist modified the original deal -- most notably, a new "exclusive" three-year option to buy some or all of U.S. Sugar's remaining 107,000 acres at \$7,400 an acre.

Water managers acknowledged they wouldn't be able to afford much, if any, of that land. That was underlined when they spent half of Monday's daylong meeting outlining plans to cut costs, cap staff raises, prioritize projects and shift funds to cover gaps.

But the new option could help in talks with outside parties whom water managers hope to coax into land swaps or sales -- particularly Florida Crystals, which owns massive tracts south of Lake Okeechobee considered targets for restoration projects.

The company, second-largest to U.S. Sugar, has said it was willing to discuss swaps but not with terms that would allow U.S. Sugar to continue leasing and farming those fields for at least a decade. Water managers said the new agreement would let them hand U.S. Sugar fields to a prospective buyer or swapper within three years.

If the board approves the deal, Wehle said, the district would have a year-long window to pinpoint the best tracts and the total needed.

Environmentalists contend more than the 73,500 acres are needed to supply the Everglades with clean water.

The district currently is analyzing nine widely varying and still sketchy restoration concepts. Most would convert massive sugar and citrus tracts into reservoirs to store water for the Everglades or marshes to treat farm runoff, but one touted by the agricultural

industry would turn a portion of Lake Okeechobee into a reservoir.

The new contract also would push back the deadline for closing the deal to as late as next June. That could ease concerns that ongoing legal challenges by Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe could derail the agreement.

Wehle told board members they could afford to make the deal even under conservative revenue projections, but assured them the agency could still back out over budget concerns up to the last minute.

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Esperan aprobación de plan para comprar terrenos

05/12/2009

El Nuevo Herald

MORGAN, CURTIS

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Aunque las autoridades del Distrito Hidráulico del Sur de la Florida aprueben el miércoles una versión de menos alcance y menos costosa en el acuerdo de tierras que el gobernador Charlie Crist concretó con grandes compañías azucareras, el tema no termina ahí.

Nuevos cambios en la oferta de \$536 millones para comprar 73,000 acres de terreno a U.S. Sugar Corp. ofrece a las autoridades de administración de aguas más tiempo y flexibilidad para llegar a acuerdos sobre terrenos --probablemente con la rival Florida Crystals-- en aras de mejorar los proyectos de restauración de los Everglades.

"Esto nos coloca en una posición mucho mejor para discutir cualquier negociación futura", dijo Carol Ann Wehle, directora ejecutiva del distrito.

Se espera que la junta de asesores del distrito, que se reunió ayer para discutir el acuerdo y debe aprobarlo, vote el miércoles o el jueves.

Aunque la aprobación no es algo seguro, las críticas han cesado desde que el gobernador --mencionando la mala situación económica y una gran presión política-- anunció en abril que redujo la oferta inicial de \$1,340 millones para comprar 181,000 acres de los terrenos de U.S. Sugar. El nuevo acuerdo contempla una reducción de más del 50 por ciento en la cantidad de tierra y dinero.

"Estamos muy cerca de hacer lo correcto, pero me preocupa el momento", dijo Charles Dauray, miembro de la junta que anteriormente votó contra el acuerdo.

Pero además se lograron otros cambios importantes durante las negociaciones del contrato desde que Crist modificó el acuerdo

original, sobre todo una nueva y "exclusiva" opción de tres años para comprar parte o todos los 107,000 acres de U.S. Sugar que quedan a \$7,400 por acre.

Las autoridades del distrito reconocieron que no pueden darse el lujo de comprar mucho terreno. Ese aspecto quedó subrayado cuando pasaron la mitad del lunes discutiendo planes para reducir costos, limitar el aumento de la nómina, priorizar proyectos y asignar fondos para cubrir déficits de presupuesto debido a la situación económica del estado.

Pero la nueva opción podría ayudar en las conversaciones con otras partes interesadas a quienes las autoridades del distrito esperan persuadir para cambiar o vender tierras, sobre todo con Florida Crystals, que tiene enormes extensiones de terrenos al sur del lago Okeechobee consideradas clave para los proyectos de restauración.

Florida Crystals, segunda en importancia después de U.S. Sugar, ha dicho que está dispuesta a discutir los trueques pero no en términos que permitan a U.S. Sugar seguir arrendando y cosechando esos cañaverales por lo menos durante una década. Las autoridades del distrito dijeron que el nuevo acuerdo les permite ofrecer los campos de U.S. Sugar a alguien que esté dispuesto a cambiar o vender tierras en un plazo de tres años, en lugar de los 10 años que se acordaron anteriormente.

Si la junta aprueba el trato, dijo Wehle, el distrito tendría también un período de un año para identificar los mejores terrenos y la cifra total de dinero que hace falta.

Por su parte, los ambientalistas afirman que se necesitan más de 73,500 acres para suministrar agua limpia a los Everglades y desviar el arrastre acuático contaminado que afecta al lago Okeechobee y a ríos de ambas costas.

El distrito está analizando nueve planes de restauración muy diferentes y todavía en su etapa conceptual. La mayor parte convierte enormes extensiones de caña de azúcar y cítricos en represas para almacenar agua para los Everglades o pantanos para tratar los arrastres de aguas contaminadas. Sin embargo, uno de los planes, solicitado por el sector agrícola, podría convertir una parte del lago Okeechobee en una represa.

El nuevo contrato también prorroga hasta junio el plazo para llegar a un acuerdo. Eso podría tranquilizar las preocupaciones de que las impugnaciones jurídicas de Florida Crystals y la tribu miccosukee puedan obstaculizar un acuerdo. Las dos compañías han impugnado los planes del distrito para financiar la compra de la tierra con bonos de deuda.

Wehle dijo a los miembros de la junta que podrían llegar a un acuerdo incluso con pronósticos de ingresos conservadores, pero aseguró que la entidad todavía podía desistir por problemas de presupuesto hasta última hora.

"Si algo cambia, existe el derecho de retirarse", dijo Wehle.

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Shifting sands in Florida's Senate Race

05/12/2009

Washington Examiner

Michael Barone

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Florida's Republican Governor Charlie Crist has announced that he is running for the Senate seat being vacated, after one term, by Republican Mel Martinez. In his three-plus years as governor, Crist has had high job ratings, not just from Republicans but from Independents and Democrats. He enters the race as a heavy favorite against either of the two Democrats who have announced, Congressman Kendrick Meek and state Senator Dan Gelber. A Quinnipiac April poll shows him with 66% job approval, 66% among Democrats and 68% among Independents and Republicans (how that averages out to 66% is unclear to me, but those are Quinnipiac's numbers). Crist had been thought to be unbeatable in a race for reelection as governor, and the one Democratic statewide officeholder, Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, announced she would not run against him.

Crist's announcement seems to be an indication that Republicans will probably hold this seat, and National Senatorial Campaign Committee Chairman John Cornyn promptly endorsed him. But there's another Republican candidate in the race, former state House Speaker Marco Rubio, who announced his candidacy before Crist's announcement and said he would stay in the race even if Crist ran; he now has a spot up welcoming Crist to the race. There are some serious issue differences between the two.

Rubio was a strong backer of Crist's predecessor, Jeb Bush, who in my judgment was the most successful policy innovator among governors in the past decade. Bush pursued rigorously conservative programs—tax cuts, school vouchers—while Crist has pursued initiatives of quite a different character—a state flood insurance program (that could be financially devastating if a hurricane destroys large parts of a major Florida metro area), the purchase of a sugar company to turn over its lands to Everglades restoration. Crist enthusiastically supported the Democratic stimulus package this winter and appeared with Barack Obama in a stimulus boosting event in Fort Myers.

So at least some Florida conservatives are backing Rubio over Crist, and there is talk that behind the scenes Bush favors him. Crist starts out way ahead, obviously, and Rubio is little known beyond the Miami area; he has a base among his fellow Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade County, but they account for less than 10% of registered Republicans statewide. There's some question, particularly in light of Cornyn's endorsement of Crist, whether Rubio can raise enough money to get his message across in the eight media markets in the nation's fourth largest state. Cornyn and other national Republicans will probably try to get Rubio to drop out, perhaps to run in what is now a wide open race for governor. There's time for maneuver: Florida has a late primary in August.

All that said, there are three reasons to think that Crist does not have an absolute lock on the Republican primary.

First, Rubio is a smart guy, with good political instincts. He has been a policy innovator and has the capacity to make a case for conservative public policies.

Second, the primary is limited to registered Republicans, a pretty broad-based electorate but one that still leans to the right on policy issues. And there's reason to believe that registered Republicans really hate the stimulus package. In Pennsylvania, Arlen Specter, who beat Pat Toomey 51%-49% in the 2004 Senate primary, saw his numbers against Toomey drop to the 27% level after he publicly supported and cast a critical vote for the stimulus package. Not even his quick and nimble move to oppose the card check bill restored his standing among Republicans. Hence his party switch. Crist's enthusiastic embrace of the stimulus package could be a real liability for him in a Republican primary.

Third, voters understand the difference between a governor and a senator. They know that some politicians are suited for one office more than another. (Case in point: the epic Senate race in North Carolina in 1984 in which Senator Jesse Helms beat Governor Jim Hunt in what was up to then the most expensive Senate race in history. Consultants on both sides of that race have told me that if the same two men were running for governor, Hunt would have won.) Crist has made his entire career in state government. His signature issues are state government issues. He hasn't weighed in much on federal issues, except the stimulus package.

In an announcement statement, he attempts to address this point. "Here in Florida, we've shown that when we put people first and work together much can be accomplished, and I intend to bring that same approach to Washington." That's pretty thin gruel in my view. Unless Crist offers voters more specifics on what he wants to do in the Senate, he may be well positioned for a general election but he will be potentially vulnerable in a Republican primary.

A mellow Crist gets GOP's blessing for Senate bid

05/12/2009

St. Petersburg Times - Online

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By Steve Bousquet, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

In Print: Wednesday, May 13, 2009 TALLAHASSEE Gov. Charlie Crist whispered his way into the race for U.S. Senate on Tuesday with an unadorned announcement, revealing the delicacy of carrying out his current job in Florida while chasing a new one in Washington.

Crist issued no lofty pronouncement and offered no platform. Two young aides quit their jobs in the governor's office to join his campaign, and the statement of candidacy was issued through the Republican Party. 'For me, it's always been about service,' Crist said. 'The challenges that Florida faces are not just Florida challenges. They are national issues.' Crist held three events that generated little news but were platforms for him to talk about why he wants to be a senator. Reporters raised the subject, which allowed Crist to avoid being accused of campaigning on state time. 'We're a long way from Election Day,' Crist said of his low-key declaration. 'I think the low-key-ness of it is a reflection of being focused on the job that I have.' Crist's soaring job approval rating as governor makes him the instant, and some might argue prohibitive, favorite to win the seat being vacated by the retirement of Sen. Mel Martinez. Crist's quiet announcement was followed moments later by endorsements from the Senate's top Republican, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, as well as from Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, who leads the National Republican Senatorial Committee that helps get Republicans elected.

The NRSC, eager to ensure that the party holds the seat in the 2010 election, threw its support to Crist even though former state House Speaker Marco Rubio of Miami is running, too. The prompt national endorsement rankled some conservatives who admire Rubio and consider Crist too moderate.

For Crist, the role as frontrunner will only amplify questions about his brief record as governor. It's hard to tell whether his popularity is a reflection of his well-liked personal traits or his policies, and much of what he has begun can be labeled unfinished business. " On taxes, Crist carried the torch for the Amendment 1 property tax-cut referendum last year, which he calls 'the largest tax cut in Florida history,' though it has been criticized as having a negligible impact on a typical homeowner. He persuaded legislators to put new tax breaks on the 2010 ballot, one aimed at helping first-time home buyers and another for commercial property owners. " On education, Crist needed to rely on nearly \$900 million in federal stimulus money to maintain public school funding and championed a 15 percent tuition hike sought by university leaders. " On insurance, Crist promoted a rate freeze on the state-run Citizens Property Insurance Corp. and opposed higher rates for private insurers, which backfired when the state's largest private insurer, State Farm, announced that it will pull out of Florida. Crist declared 'good riddance,' but it remains to be seen how Florida's insurance market will stabilize in the absence of such a large player. In the just-ended session, lawmakers passed steps to make the insurance industry more market-based.

Leslie Spencer of AARP joined dozens of advocacy groups, some with ties to the Democratic Party, in criticizing a lack of leadership and shortsighted fiscal policy that relies on federal stimulus

money without a thorough review of tax loopholes. 'We can't just give it lip service and say things will get better down the road and just hope that will happen,' Spencer said. Other actions by Crist could cause trouble with segments of the Republican base, particularly in a primary. He was an enthusiastic supporter of President Barack Obama's stimulus package, is an advocate of expanded gambling that he opposed in 2006 and has ducked questions about whether he will sign a state budget with large increases in cigarette taxes and motor vehicle fees. 'I want to review all those things, and it's nice that we have the line item (veto) in Florida,' he said. Manley Fuller of the Florida Wildlife Federation said Crist can run for the Senate as an environmentalist, and noted that today the South Florida Water Management District could approve a scaled-down purchase of U. S. Sugar land, the major environmental initiative of Crist's term. 'We have had a very good working relationship on a number of environmental issues,' Fuller said. Indeed, beyond any policy initiative, Crist's story is a triumph of imagery and perception. He has polished an image as an earnest and caring leader who rejects the rank partisanship that seems never to be out of fashion in Washington.

Asked why he wants to swap the governorship of one of America's largest states to take a junior seat for the minority party in the U. S. Senate, Crist said he wants to ensure that 'there's an attitude of working together to get things done for Florida and for America. I know that's what people of this state want, and the people of this country.' To keep his Senate candidacy on track, Crist needs to be a very dutiful governor.

He already has been the subject of partisan attacks as 'Empty Chair Charlie.' His frequent days off have been the subject of unflattering news stories, and his lack of hands-on engagement for much of the 2009 legislative session angered some fellow Republicans.

Crist loyalists say privately that his poll ratings and proven fund-raising ability will eventually clear the GOP field. But Rubio, his current Republican rival, told Fox News that their primary will be about two contrasting visions, with Rubio casting himself as the only true conservative. 'There is one wing of the party, I don't believe it is the majority wing of the party, that believes that if you can't beat them, join them,' Rubio said. Times/Herald staff writers Mary Ellen Klas and Alex Leary contributed to this report. Steve Bousquet can be reached at bousquet@sptimes.com or (850) 224-7263.

Buy the US Sugar Land

05/13/2009

Palm Beach Post

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Editorial

There's an admittedly high price to pay for buying large swaths of U.S. Sugar land. It's worth paying, however, because the South Florida Water Management District - not private sugar growers - would control the future of the Everglades.

The governing board will decide today whether the district should pay \$536 million for 73,000 acres. The district would pay a premium to shrink the deal from a purchase of 180,000 acres for \$1.34 billion. Buying less land now, while retaining the opportunity to buy more, would reduce the district's debt at a time of economic hardship. But to improve the deal, the district must meet the modest demands of officials in Hendry County.

U.S. Sugar deal

Because of inaction by Gov. Crist, who has championed the buyout to strengthen his environmental record for a U.S. Senate run, the area that would be hurt by the loss of U.S. Sugar jobs has had no representative on the district board since the deal was announced in June. Yet for the first time, Hendry officials are not actively opposing the buyout. The new deal, they say, gives them more time to prepare for job losses. During that time, they want a reasonable commitment from the state to help them survive the departure of the company that built Clewiston.

One proposal is for the water district to open an office in Clewiston. Another is to four-lane a 22-mile stretch of State Road 80 through Hendry County, the only two-lane stretch between West Palm Beach and Fort Myers. Most significantly, they want the state to back a Scripps-like jobs program to provide \$5 million a year for 10 years. All of them make sense.

The governing board also can sweeten this deal by insisting that district staff finally move forward on swaps critical to getting all the land needed for water storage south of Lake Okeechobee. While storage and treatment north of the lake is important, the district contends correctly that it can't find enough willing sellers to clean runoff before it pollutes Lake Okeechobee. The land south of the lake will hold the water and siphon it into treatment areas, where it can be cleaned and pumped into the Everglades. The opportunity to convert cane land is so unexpected that the state-federal Everglades restoration plan doesn't contemplate it. The opportunity is unlikely to recur if U.S. Sugar sells to private owners.

To assure that it can trade with Florida Crystals, which owns thousands of acres south of the lake, the district has retained a right to buy more U.S. Sugar land at \$7,400 an acre for three years. The U.S. Sugar soil is richer than Florida Crystals' land, making trades more likely.

The governing board, which voted 4-3 for the larger purchase in December, might reject this proposal. That would be bad for the Everglades and the public. Aside from providing natural habitat, the Everglades is critical to meeting South Florida's urban water needs. The current Everglades restoration plan relies on a massive commitment to the untried practice of storing water underground. Early tests have not been encouraging.

Governing board members who don't want this deal will have to answer this question: If not U.S. Sugar land at this price now, what land at what price when?

