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Total Clips: 3

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
Everglades Restoration Plan Could Cost As Much as \$17Billion, Records Show	07/14/2009	Palm Beach Post	Quinlan, Paul
Michael Sole Bill didn't alter goals of water districts	07/13/2009	Tallahassee Democrat -- Online	
Benefiting the Environment and the People of Florida	07/13/2009	Foster Folly News	

Everglades Restoration Plan Could Cost As Much as \$17Billion, Records Show

[Return to Top](#)

07/14/2009
Palm Beach Post
Quinlan, Paul

The Everglades restoration that Gov. Charlie Crist articulated when he struck his monumental land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp. could cost as much as \$17 billion to carry out, according to water agency records.

That's more than 30 times the cost of the land alone, which Crist and environmentalists want to use to restore the historic flow of water from Lake Okeechobee south into the Everglades.

The 73,000-acre, \$536 million deal, downsized twice by Crist as the economy tumbled, is expected to close in early 2010 and would rank as Florida's most expensive conservation land purchase.

But opponents returned to court Monday to block the South Florida Water Management District, the agency Crist tapped to finance the deal, from borrowing \$2.2 billion to buy the land and begin restoration.

Attorneys for Florida Crystals, U.S. Sugar's chief rival, and the Miccosukee Indian Tribe, which lives in the Everglades, produced internal water management agency records estimating the cost to construct the necessary reservoirs and filter marshes at between \$8 billion and \$17 billion.

"The fact of the matter is, they do not have the money to do what they say they are doing," said Joseph Klock, attorney for Florida Crystals.

Executive Director Carol Wehle testified that she had not seen the documents and could not comment on their accuracy. She said she vaguely recalled briefing district leaders that the cost could run between \$3 billion and \$12 billion.

But Wehle emphasized that the full cost of the overall restoration project would be spread over 30 or 40 years be paid for by a combination of local, state and federal agencies.

"I don't think anyone has a crystal ball to project how we are going to pay for Everglades restoration," Wehle said. "We are doing the best we can as the years go by."

Even so, at those prices, the restoration on U.S. Sugar lands would cost as much as or more than the sweeping, \$10.9 billion Everglades restoration plan that Congress passed in 2000 and agreed to split 50-50 with the state. Although work has begun, not one of the 2000 plan's 68 pieces have been completed. It is unclear how the two projects would overlap.

The water district plans to finance the land deal with \$2.2 billion in certificates of participation, which are similar to bonds but circumvent the requirement for voter approval.

But Klock pointed out that 2000 restoration plan produced reams of planning materials and engineering documents, while documented plans for the U.S. Sugar land amount to little more than a handful of overhead presentations given at agency board meetings.

Klock said identifying a clear plan on the agency's part was all but impossible. "It's like trying to chase a piece of mercury across the floor with a hammer," he said.

Michael Sole Bill didn't alter goals of water districts

07/13/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Tallahassee Democrat -- Online

Michael W. Sole ? My View ? July 14, 2009

Gov. Charlie Crist has signed into law a bill concerning our water resources that, while not perfect, provides many benefits to Florida's environment and its citizens.

Senate Bill 2080 has been somewhat controversial because it requires the governing boards of the state's five water management districts to delegate the authority to approve permits to their executive directors. Yet each of the water management districts has been — and will continue to be — committed to open government and transparency.

Nothing in this new law diminishes, alters or limits the ability of the public to inquire or obtain information about a permit application or to object to an application.

While much attention has focused on delegation, largely unnoticed are other aspects of the bill that offer greater protection for Florida's water resources. Among these are provisions that:

Change Florida law regarding environmentally friendly landscaping. The use of Florida-friendly landscaping and other measures by homeowners is an effort to conserve Florida's water resources, which is in the best interest of all Floridians.

Expand lands eligible to receive compensation to local governments. This provision puts into Florida law a commitment of the South Florida Water Management District to ensure that smaller Glades communities are not adversely impacted by the U.S. Sugar land acquisition.

Streamline government and save taxpayer dollars — allowing meetings to be conducted via technology and authorizing the use of certain long-term permits.

Provide fiscally sound policies that ensure the water management districts do not overextend their financial commitments.

Every drop of water makes a difference to Florida's future, and we must continue to protect and wisely manage our water resources. There is no doubt that Florida's environment is better protected when all stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process.

I am committed to preserving the public process throughout this next year and will continue working with the executive directors of the water management districts to ensure openness and transparency.

I look forward to working with the 2010 Legislature to develop a process that sustains transparency and stakeholder participation.

Benefiting the Environment and the People of Florida

07/13/2009

[Return to Top](#)

Foster Folly News

DEP Secretary Michael W. Sole: Senate Bill 2080.

On June 30th, Governor Charlie Crist signed Senate Bill 2080, relating to water resources, into law. Although the bill is not perfect, it is my firm belief a belief that I expressed to the Governor that this bill should be signed for the many benefits it provides to both the environment and the people of Florida.

Although the new law requires the Governing Boards of the states five water management districts to delegate authority to approve permits to their executive directors, each of the water management districts have been and will continue to be committed to open government and transparency.

The simple fact is nothing in Senate Bill 2080 diminishes, alters, or limits the ability of the public from inquiring or obtaining information about a permit application or objecting to an application.

While much attention has focused on delegation, many other aspects of the bill that offer greater protection for Floridas water resources have gone largely unnoticed. However, these changes will help ensure the protection and conservation of Floridas water resources. They include:

Changes to Florida law regarding environmentally-friendly landscaping. The use of Florida-friendly landscaping and other measures by homeowners is an effort to conserve Floridas water resources, which is in the best interest of all Floridians.

Expands lands eligible to receive compensation to local governments. This provision puts into Florida law a commitment of the South Florida Water Management District to ensure the smaller Glades communities are not adversely impacted by the U.S. Sugar land acquisition.

Streamlines government and saves taxpayer dollars allowing meetings to be conducted via technology and authorizing the use of certain long-term permits.

Provides fiscally sound policies that ensure the water management districts do not overextend their financial commitments.

Every drop of water makes a difference to Floridas future, and we must continue to protect and wisely manage our water resources. There is no doubt that Floridas environment is better protected when all stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process. As a result, I am committed to preserving the public process throughout this next year. I will continue working with the executive directors of the states five water management districts to ensure openness and transparency. In addition, I look forward to working with the 2010 Legislature to develop a process that sustains transparency and stakeholder participation.

Michael W. Sole

Secretary

Florida Department of Environmental Protection

