

EDITORIAL: Sugar secrecy
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Florida's two-month-old deal to buy out U.S. Sugar Corp. and restore the Everglades is already threatening to turn sour.

Last June, Gov. Charlie Crist announced plans for the state to purchase the sugar refiner for \$1.75 billion and liquidate it, thereby freeing up 187,000 acres from industrial development. Officials hope that will end pollution of the Everglades and Lake Okeechobee and restore natural water flow to the River of Grass.

However, details are still being worked out with the company, and lawmakers in Tallahassee and Washington are beginning to ask questions that aren't being answered. Among the top concerns is what is going to happen to the 1,700 jobs that will be lost and how that will affect the surrounding communities.

"There is no master plan ... to assist in the transition of this community," U.S. Rep. Adam Putnam, R-Barstow, told the Tampa Tribune. "No questions are being answered about the impact on the overall restoration plan."

The Tribune reported that six weeks ago, U.S. Reps. Alcee Hastings, D-Miramar, and Allen Boyd, D-Monticello, sent a list of questions to state Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole. They included such fundamental queries as: "What is the precise mission of this land acquisition deal?" and "What are the long-term operation and maintenance costs of implementing this deal?" They are still awaiting answers.

Congress has no role in Florida's purchase of U.S. Sugar, but it does appropriate federal funds to complete Everglades restoration projects that are considered vital to the success of the overall plan. So it's not terribly smart to freeze out the guys who hold the purse strings.

The purchase of U.S. Sugar is supposed to be funded by bonds issued by the South Florida Water Management District, which will be paid off with future property-tax revenues collected from its 16 counties. Thus, upstate taxpayers (read: Panhandle residents) won't have to contribute. But what about ancillary costs of the project? There will be tremendous political pressure for the state to compensate U.S. Sugar employees who lose their jobs and to provide "economic aid" to the distressed towns. Where is that money going to come from?

The state, wracked by a morose economy, has already cut its budget by \$6 billion this year, and it recently found out that declining tax revenues had left another \$1.5 billion hole to patch. Officials are also sweating out hurricane season, hoping that a major storm does not strike and force state-backed Citizens Property Insurance Corp. - Florida's largest insurer - to pay out billions in claims.

No one knows when or how much the economy will rebound, so it would be foolish and reckless for the state to assume significant new financial burdens in this climate. And truth be told, one of the reasons for the current budget crisis is because the state spent too much money even in flush times.

Nothing should be finalized until the details of a deal that has been negotiated in secret are made public and thoroughly debated.