

Jonathan Ullman: U.S. Sugar purchase still best solution for water resources

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The U.S. Sugar Corporation land acquisition leaves many readers questioning the validity of such a purchase during these challenging economic times.

We expect water managers to fight for the best interests of taxpayers. But make no mistake, we will all lose if this deal collapses.

Acquiring land within the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), the vast land on sugar farms south of Lake Okeechobee is vital to restoring the Everglades. Scientists say extensive tracts of land will be needed for the storage and cleaning of water flowing into the Everglades. Without this land, the Caloosahatchee River will continue to suffer degradation due to discharges from Lake Okeechobee. The health of the Everglades will erode.

If Florida fails to acquire this land when it is offered by a willing seller, it may never be available again. If we don't seize the moment, U.S. Sugar could sell key land parcels to other buyers like rock miners or developers. The opportunity for strategic tracts of land would be lost permanently.

To ensure that Florida has sufficient water supply for generations to come and to protect the Everglades, it is necessary to acquire land while it is available. This purchase is the first step in accomplishing long term objectives. By securing tracts of land in a phased approach, the

expenditures are affordable while providing the option to acquire future land purchases as our economy recovers and Florida's finances improve.

To delay or abandon the purchase of these 73,000 acres would be catastrophic as taxpayers will find themselves footing the bill for billions of dollars in 333 unproven and potentially unsafe underground water storage wells.

These wells were only considered because there were no willing sellers of sugar land even though the consensus in the scientific community was that the solution to our water woes is the acquisition of land in the EAA. The former sugar lands will store and filter fresh water so that the Caloosahatchee can run clean again and nourishing the estuaries and near-shore Gulf waters to support abundant sea life.

They will filter out phosphorus causing the Everglades to ignite into a cancer of cattails unsuitable for wildlife. The sugar lands will allow more water to flow deep into Everglades National Park and end the massive erosion of soils and fires drought causes.

For the sake of the survival of the Everglades and for sufficient, clean water for South Florida residents, we need to finish what we started and purchase the U. S. Sugar lands now.

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