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To best restore Everglades, re-do U.S. Sugar deal

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Special To The Tampa Tribune

Friends of the Everglades were understandably excited when Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled a \$1.75 billion deal to buy out U.S. Sugar two years ago, effectively closing a major polluter of the Everglades.

But much has changed - and been revealed - since the deal was announced. Given what is known today, the South Florida Water Management District should shelve this sweetheart deal for U.S. Sugar and explore other options.

Here's why:

The purchase, since downsized, no longer includes the most important tracts needed to restore the Everglades' natural flow. The six land tracts under contract don't even connect.

U.S. Sugar will not go out of business, as first reported. Instead, it will continue to farm the lands essential for restoration for up to 20 years, getting an exclusive lease at less-than-market rates.

To come up with the purchase price, SFWMD has delayed - perhaps for decades - nearly a dozen Everglades restoration projects, including a reservoir that has already cost taxpayers more than \$300 million.

After state appraisers raised concerns about the sale being vastly over-priced, political insiders changed the rules to cut them out of the loop.

Since the surprise deal was revealed, other sugar companies have expressed interest in selling their lands, too, including more-essential acres needed for restoration. And don't forget, a private company has offered to buy the U.S. Sugar property and sell back whatever is needed to help the Everglades - an interesting option.

To pay U.S. Sugar, the district's financial consultant says operating and maintenance budgets must be slashed, an unacceptable consequence.

Similarly, property taxes will likely increase for homeowners and businesses in the 16 counties served by SFWMD. That has yet to be publicly addressed.

Yes, much has changed since this deal was announced. Newspapers have reported cozy deal-making, over-the-top appraisals and pending tax increases - wrapped in the flag of Everglades restoration.

I have a strong record of conservation. I was the sponsor of the Everglades Restoration bill that created the bonding authority for its restoration, as well as legislation that created the Florida Forever land preservation program.

But the U.S. Sugar deal represents reckless public policy, drawn by a governor's office that only had eyes for one politically powerful company.

If we can't renegotiate this deal to purchase only the lands necessary at a price that makes sense, we should scrap it and start over. At a minimum, the leased lands should be opened up to competitors to get a fair-market price.

If the water management district cares about restoration, it should use the six-month contract-extension time approved last week to consider other options, including the offer from private industry to buy the land and sell the state only what's needed for restoration.