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Total Clips: 6

Headline	Date	Outlet	Reporter
<a href="#">Tea Party activists protest at South Florida Water Management District</a>	07/15/2010	WPTV-TV	
<a href="#">Crist not fading in polls as predicted</a>	07/15/2010	Florida Today	
<a href="#">Tea party protesters target Crist's Everglades land deal with U.S. Sugar</a>	07/15/2010	Sun Sentinel	Reid, Andy
<a href="#">Activists protest water district plan for major land buy for Everglades</a>	07/15/2010	Palm Beach Post	Sorenttrue, Jennifer
<a href="#">Tea Party Protests U.S. Sugar Land Purchase</a>	07/14/2010	WPBF-TV	
<a href="#">Opponents Lash Out at Water District Over Land Deal</a>	07/14/2010	Sunshine State News	Ward, Kenric

## Tea Party activists protest at South Florida Water Management District

[Return to Top](#)

07/15/2010

WPTV-TV

\* By: Sun-Sentinel .

\* Andy Reid

SUBURBAN WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - More than 80 Tea Party activists from across the state converged in West Palm Beach on Wednesday to oppose Gov. Charlie Crist's proposed \$536 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

The group — some wearing T-shirts that said "Don't Tread On Me" and "Sorry Charlie" — targeted the South Florida Water Management District board meeting where officials were expected to discuss their property tax rate and how the land deal affects the agency's \$1 billion budget.

The proposed land deal, two years in the making, calls for buying 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar that could be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows to the Everglades.

The water management district leads Everglades restoration and the deal, orchestrated by Crist, calls for the district to buy the land. The district intends to borrow the money for the land deal and use the agency's property tax revenue to pay off the long-term debt.

Tea Party activists argued Wednesday that taxpayers can't afford a half billion-dollar land deal that they dubbed a "bailout" from Crist to U.S. Sugar.

"It's overpriced. ... It's a payback," said Marianne Moran, one of the protest organizers. "We don't need it."

District Board Chairman Eric Buermann defended the still-pending deal as a way to acquire land vital to restoring the Everglades, which is also relied on to restock South Florida's drinking water supply.

"It is a bailout, but for the Everglades. ... For the environment," Buermann said.

Environmental groups and other supporters call the blockbuster deal a historic opportunity to acquire former Everglades land drained through the decades to make way for agriculture.

Some land deal supporters blamed Crist's political opponents and U.S. Sugar rival Florida Crystals for fueling the Tea Party protest, which came complete with free bus transportation and boxed lunches.

Tea Party protest organizers said the protest was their idea. Some of the signs they waved before the start of Wednesday's board meeting read: "Property taxes aren't sweet," "No sweets for you Charlie," and "No bucks for muck."

They passed out sugar cookies with "End Charlie's Bailout" written in icing on top.

"This is a bad deal," said Everett Wilkinson, one of the event organizers. "There's no way they can pay for this without raising our taxes."

District officials have long maintained that they would not raise property tax rates to pay for the U.S. Sugar land deal.

The district's latest budget proposal calls for keeping the tax rate the same as it has been since 1998.

The district's nine-member board, appointed by the governor, on Thursday will be asked to approve a maximum tax rate for the budget year that begins in October. Final approval of the district's tax rate comes in September.

Crist in June 2008 first proposed spending \$1.75 billion to acquire 180,000 acres and all of U.S. Sugar's facilities to make way for Everglades restoration. The souring economy led to the scaled-down 73,000-acre version, with a 10-year option to acquire another 107,000 acres.

The land deal still must overcome a challenge to the Florida Supreme Court. The district still has the option of backing out before the pending closing if the budget strain becomes too great.

Even though the district board is appointed by the governor, the board members will not just "rubber stamp anybody's idea," Buermann said.

"This is our water supply for South Florida," Buermann said. "The health of the Everglades is more than an environmental issue."

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## **Crist not fading in polls as predicted**

07/15/2010

Florida Today

[Return to Top](#)

Gov. Charlie Crist, with no party affiliation, isn't flaming out in the U.S. Senate race the way pollsters predicted. A Reuters/Ipsos poll released Tuesday portrays the Senate horserace thusly:

Charlie Crist, independent: 35 percent

Marco Rubio, Republican: 28 percent

Kendrick Meek, Democrat: 17 percent

Those numbers don't change significantly if Democratic businessman Jeff Greene beats U.S. Rep. Meek in the primary, the Reuters/Ipsos poll found.

By now, Crist was supposed to be fading if not trailing. After a May poll showed Crist in the lead, Mason-Dixon polling director Brad Coker predicted that Crist would slip to third place as Meek's profile rose and Democratic and African-American voters gravitate toward the Democrat.

"When you see that more than half of Crist voters are Democrats, that's a big red warning sign," Coker said then.

But Meek hasn't made an impression in Central Florida, where the Brevard County teachers' union recently hosted a reception and fundraiser for Crist on Merritt Island.

Rubio keeps appealing to the same conservative Republican primary voters who already squarely supported him -- and who had already abandoned Crist.

And the formerly Republican governor keeps doing independent things -- courting labor, calling a special session to permanently ban oil drilling within 10 miles of Florida's shores -- that inflame conservatives but reassure Florida moderates, liberals and civil servants.

Today's example: Conservative Tea Party activists have called a press conference for 11:30 a.m. to blast Crist's support of a state deal with U.S. Sugar for acreage to restore the Everglades. That's likely to produce even more positive "free media" for Crist, who understands that Florida voters ranked environmental protection as the No. 2 issue in this election, with the Gulf oil spill trailing in third, according to the Reuters/Ipsos poll.

Note that Crist's seven-point lead over Rubio in the July poll is bigger than the four-point margin found in June by a Quinnipiac University survey. Like Coker, Quinnipiac's assistant polling director, Peter Brown, predicted then that Crist's lead would disappear once Republicans and Democrats started attacking him in advertisements in a general election.

Maybe. Or, maybe not.

"While incumbents have faced a wave of voter anger in other states, a majority of Florida voters -- 53 percent -- approve of Crist's performance as governor and 41 percent disapprove," Reuters reports. "A 57 percent majority says Florida is on the right track."

What do you think?

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## Tea party protesters target Crist's Everglades land deal with U.

### S. Sugar

07/15/2010

Sun Sentinel

Reid, Andy

Taunting Gov. Charlie Crist with sugar cookies topped with the word "BAILOUT," tea party activists converged west of West Palm Beach on Wednesday to protest a proposed \$536 million Everglades restoration land deal with U.S. Sugar Corp.

More than 80 tea party supporters — some wearing T-shirts that said, "Don't Tread on Me" and "Sorry Charlie" — targeted the South Florida Water Management District board meeting, where officials discussed their property tax rate and how the governor's proposed land deal affects the agency's \$1 billion budget.

The proposed land deal, two years in the making, calls for buying 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar that could be used to build reservoirs and treatment areas to restore water flows to the Everglades.

The Water Management District leads Everglades restoration, and the deal, pushed by Crist, calls for the district to buy the land. The district plans to borrow the money needed and use its property tax revenue to pay off the long-term debt.

Tea party activists argued Wednesday that taxpayers can't afford a half-billion-dollar deal that they dubbed a "bailout" from Crist to U.S. Sugar.

"It's overpriced. ... It's a payback," said Marianne Moran, one of the protest organizers. "We don't need it."

They criticized the district for sticking with a deal based on 2-year-old appraisals and without a finalized plan for how to use the land or how to pay for future construction.

"They damaged the land and then we are going to pay the highest value?" Everett Wilkinson, chairman of the South Florida tea party and one of the protest organizers, yelled at the district board members. "Heck, they should pay us money!"

District Board Chairman Eric Buermann defended the still-pending deal as a way to acquire land vital to restore the

[Return to Top](#)

Everglades, which also is relied on to restock South Florida's drinking water supply.

"It is a bailout, but for the Everglades. ... for the environment," Buermann said.

Environmental groups and other supporters call the blockbuster deal a historic opportunity to acquire former Everglades land drained through the decades to make way for agriculture.

They envision building a series of reservoirs and treatment areas to recreate the flow of water that once naturally replenished the Everglades.

"We need to get the water south and this is the way to do it," said Drew Martin, of the Sierra Club.

Some land deal supporters blamed Crist's political opponents and U.S. Sugar rival Florida Crystals for fueling the tea party protest. Participants got free charter bus transportation and box lunches.

"This little staged event — busing folks in, providing a free lunch — has our business competitors' fingerprints all over it," said U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez, who disputed the "bailout" description. "This is a straightforward real estate transaction at independently appraised market value. All the tea in China couldn't make what they are saying true."

Florida Crystals Vice President Gaston Cantens denied that the company paid for the buses and lunches. Blaming Florida Crystals for the protest is an example of the district and U.S. Sugar trying to "deflect attention away from their problems," Cantens said.

Florida Crystals and the Miccosukee Tribe still are waging a legal battle against the U.S. Sugar deal.

Tea party protest organizers said the protest was their idea.

Many protestors wore T-shirts that said, "Sorry Charlie" and "You need to drop out," with pictures of Crist with President Barack Obama.

Some of their signs read: "Property taxes aren't sweet," "No sweets for you Charlie," and "No bucks for muck."

They passed out sugar cookies with "END CHARLIE'S BAILOUT" written in icing.

Even if the land deal doesn't lead to an immediate increase in the property tax rate, protestors argued that long-term the deal would add to the strain on taxpayers.

"The state is broke," said tea party supporter Neil Figueredo, of Port Charlotte, who rode one of the chartered buses to Wednesday's meeting. "This is no time to be creating more debt."

District officials have long maintained that they would not raise property tax rates to pay for the U.S. Sugar land deal.

The district's latest budget proposal would maintain the tax rate where it's been since 1998.

In June 2008, Crist announced a plan to spend \$1.75 billion to acquire 180,000 acres and all of U.S. Sugar's facilities to make way for Everglades restoration. The souring economy eventually led to the scaled-down 73,000-acre, \$536 million version, with a 10-year option to acquire another 107,000 acres.

Declining property tax revenues due to the struggling economy means that the district may consider borrowing less and putting more money down or reducing the size of the deal again.

The proposal still must overcome a challenge to the Florida Supreme Court over the proposed borrowing for the purchase. The latest contract with U.S. Sugar expires in September and the district still has the option of backing out if the budget strain becomes too great.

The need for buying more land for water storage and treatment was a priority long before Crist proposed the U.S. Sugar deal, district officials said.

"This is our water supply for South Florida," Buermann said. "The health of the Everglades is more than an environmental issue."

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## Activists protest water district plan for major land buy for Everglades

[Return to Top](#)

07/15/2010

Palm Beach Post

Sorentrve, Jennifer

Tea Party activists from across South Florida urged regional water managers Wednesday to kill the planned \$500 million purchase of land owned by U.S. Sugar.

About 100 activists rallied outside the South Florida Water Management District's headquarters on Gun Club Road to oppose the purchase, which Gov. Charlie Crist unveiled in 2009 as part of a plan to increase the flow of surface water through Florida's Everglades. The deal's opponents describe it as a corporate handout rather than a boon to Everglades restoration.

The Florida Supreme Court is weighing opponents' arguments that the state's plans to finance the purchase because the land deal would serve no public purpose and would delay restoration.

Many in Wednesday's crowd held signs and wore T-shirts criticizing Crist and the land deal. Some traveled from the state's west coast.

"The message is we want to end this bailout," said Marianne Moran, who gave each of the board members a box of cookies made with U.S. Sugar's product.

"If you end this bailout you can cut our taxes," she said. "We are overpaying for this deal."

Martin County resident Cindy Lucas, chair of her county's 9/12 Tea Party Committee, said the district should be doing more to cut its budget.

"We are tired of taxes without representation," Lucas said. "People are suffering here in Florida and we are going to go out and spend this money. No more bailouts."

Several environmental groups, including the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, spoke in favor of the purchase, saying it is critical to restoring the Everglades and supplying South Florida with clean drinking water.

"I think this is just an attempt to influence the election in favor of Marco Rubio," Drew Martin of the Sierra Club said of Wednesday's rally. Rubio, former Florida House Speaker, is facing Crist in U.S. Senate race and has received campaign contributions from Florida Crystals, a rival of U.S. Sugar.

"Really, they are well meaning people that are being manipulated by the industry," Martin said. "This is a fight between sugar companies."

Members of the governing board said they have no plans to raise taxes to pay for the purchase.

"We have no plan and there has been no discussion of raising taxes," Chairman Eric Buermann said. "I know there are a lot of rumors out there regarding the acquisition of U.S. Sugar.

"There are some corporate opponents," he said, in an apparent reference to Florida Crystals. "Whatever information you are hearing The information is wrong."

Florida Crystals spokesman Gaston Cantens said the company is opposed to the purchase, but did not organize or pay for the Tea Party protest.

"Two years have gone by and they still have no clue what to do with the land they're trying to force the taxpayers to buy," Cantens said in an email.

Likewise, a campaign spokesman for Rubio said Wednesday: "For a long time, Marco has been a vocal opponent of Charlie Crist's taxpayer-funded bailout of this major campaign contributor. This is another example of Charlie Crist's willingness to say and do anything to win an election, even if it comes at the taxpayer's expense."

The budget proposal would keep the district wide tax rate flat next year at 25 cents for every \$1,000 of taxable value,

the same amount charged to homeowners this year. The plan would leave the district with about \$61 million less in property taxes than it took in this year.

Governing board members are slated to vote on the rate proposal at a meeting today

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## Tea Party Protests U.S. Sugar Land Purchase

07/14/2010

WPBF-TV

[Return to Top](#)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- About 50 people protested outside the South Florida Water Management District's board meeting Wednesday in opposition to a proposal to buy U.S. Sugar Corp. land for Everglades restoration.

Gov. Charlie Crist announced a plan to buy 180,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar Corp. in 2008.

The initial price tag was set at \$1.75 billion but has since been adjusted to a purchase of about 80,000 acres for \$536 million.

Camille Verbin, who traveled from Florida's west coast to join in the protest, called the deal "ridiculous."

"If Charlie Crist wants to bail out U.S. Sugar, he should use his own money, not mine, not the taxpayers and certainly not under the guise of restoring the Everglades," Verbin said.

Verbin and other Tea Party protesters call the land sale "Charlie's bailout." They said the purchase would do little to save the Everglades and will only increase property taxes.

In order for the sale to go through, the SFWMD must pay for the land and finance the deal.

"Taxpayers ought to have a say in the way those dollars are spent," SFWMD spokesman Randy Smith said.

Smith said the scaled-down proposal doesn't include buying railroads and other parcels that were not essential to the environment.

"We're looking at land that is critical for Everglades restoration," Smith said. "It's land that was off the table for decades. This was not even a possibility because there were no willing sellers out there. So now it's an opportunity to pick up land in an area that used to be natural Everglades."

The outspoken protesters were upset about the governor's political ties to U.S. Sugar and the sweet deal the company could be getting.

"Right now we're all in a tough economic time," Tea Party executive director Marianne Moran said. "We all have to tighten our belts. Government should do the same and not bailout a private corporation."

A U.S. Sugar representative said the company hopes to sell the property for a fair market price, one set by appraisers paid for by the SFWMD.

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## Opponents Lash Out at Water District Over Land Deal

07/14/2010

Sunshine State News

Ward, Kenric

[Return to Top](#)

Calling the purchase of U.S. Sugar Corporation's land an overpriced corporate bailout, tea partiers Wednesday urged the South Florida Water Management District to scrap the deal.

More than 100 protesters -- hailing from Punta Gorda to Port St. Lucie -- converged on the district's West Palm Beach headquarters to blast the governing board's plan to acquire the land for Everglades restoration.

"The district's own analysis shows this purchase will ultimately cost taxpayers \$12 billion. You have an escape clause in this deal, and that's what I'm suggesting you do," said Marianne Moran of Tea Party in Action.

Gov. Charlie Crist, who appointed all nine members of the district's governing board, was pilloried in absentia as a "lame duck" who engineered an ill-conceived "bailout" for U.S. Sugar, one of his longtime corporate contributors.

Skepticism about the deal was heightened when board members and district staffers gave mixed responses to pointed questions about whether the approved \$536 million purchase price is in the water district's upcoming budget.

"It's complicated," said Chairman Eric Buermann, who added, "The board would not proceed by raising taxes. We would live within resources."

District officials have recommended no increase in taxes for fiscal 2011. Citing falling land values, analysts anticipate that the district's revenues will be reduced by \$61 million in the coming year.

The board is scheduled to vote on its 2011 budget Thursday.

Tea party speakers flipped the district's financial analysis by noting that the value of the U.S. Sugar property also has fallen sharply.

"They're talking about paying 2007 prices in 2010. That's upside down," Steven Rosenblum, a candidate for State House District 89, said during an outdoor rally that preceded the SFWMD meeting.

While some protesters called on the board to delay or renegotiate the purchase, more urged the board to sink the deal altogether, characterizing it as scientifically unsound.

"This is an arm of environmental extremists," declared Jim McGovern, a member of the Martin County 9/12 Committee.

Speakers from the Sierra Club and Audubon defended the district's action while casting aspersions on the tea parties' demand to cut spending.

"If this project was in Afghanistan or Iraq, you would support it," Drew Martin of the Sierra Club said to a chorus of boos.

Buermann acknowledged, "This deal as it is currently constituted is a challenge" and, in regard to funding, he admitted, "We don't know where we're going from here."

The proposed Everglades land purchase is currently under review at the Florida Supreme Court, which is examining the district's financing package.

Buermann expects that the project will pass muster at the court, and noted that future legal action will push more such ventures forward.

"Court rulings will require acquisition of more land to restore the Everglades with clean water. This is our water supply.

"The Everglades is an issue about civilization, whether we can continue to inhabit South Florida. We're under tremendous pressure," Buermann said.

The district's 73,000-acre purchase plan has fractured Floridians environmentally, economically and politically.

Unveiled with much fanfare by Crist in 2008, the project was subsequently downsized from the original \$1.75 billion deal. The revised plan contains an option for 107,000 more acres.

The sale of the U.S. Sugar tracts purportedly will "save" the Everglades through the restoration of a southbound flow way. Critics, including Florida Crystals, a rival sugar concern with large land holdings of its own, have called the purchase a scientifically unproven. Others deem it a political payoff for one of Crist's biggest financial backers.

Everett Wilkinson, state director of the South Florida Tea Party, presented 2,000 petitions opposing the deal.

"We're against all kinds of bailouts," said Wilkinson, who is based in Palm Beach Gardens.

Rosa Durando, a longtime Palm Beach County resident, is no fan of the tea party movement. "They're ignorant, self-serving bastards," she fumes. Still, Durando agrees that the land deal is badly overpriced.

"It's highway robbery," she said.

Durando, who said she favors sound restoration projects, complained that the the U.S. Sugar acquisition was "mishandled from the beginning."

"If (the water district) had come out with dimensions and paths for a flow way, they would have gotten more public support and less cynicism," Durando said.

But, she added, "The (state and district) agencies have not acted properly and the (district) board is totally ignorant. They're political appointments."

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