

Constitutional Language for Amendment 1 included EAA as a purchase option: "Funds to be expended ONLY for the following purposes... ...lands in the Everglades Agricultural Area..."

Amendment 1 passed by 75%. Passed in Martin County by 78.65%.



[Everglades group wants state to buy more Big Sugar land](#)

By Andy Reid Sun Sentinel

Everglades Coalition wants the state to buy more land from U.S. Sugar Corp. Environmental group planning to ask state to buy land that could cost at least \$350 million State may be asked to buy 46,800 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land that could cost \$350 million Buying more Big Sugar land is at the top of Everglades advocates' 2015 to-do list, with taxpayers potentially facing a price tag that could hit \$350 million.

The Everglades Coalition is calling for the state to buy another 46,800 acres of U.S. Sugar Corp. land. The sugar cane fields and other property south of Lake Okeechobee would be used to get more water flowing south to the Everglades, instead of draining that water out to sea for South Florida flood control.

"The acquisition of the land is a critical piece of the restoration puzzle," Jason Totoiu, Everglades Coalition national co-chairman, said Friday.

South Florida taxpayers already spent \$197 million in a 2010 land deal allowing the South Florida Water Management District to buy 26,800 acres from U.S. Sugar for Everglades restoration efforts.

That deal also gave the South Florida Water Management District an exclusive, 10-year option to buy some or all of U.S. Sugar's remaining 153,200 acres. Under the deal, state officials have until October to be first in line to buy another 46,800 acres of that U.S. Sugar land. Yet U.S. Sugar's interest in selling more land to the state may have cooled since the 2010 deal.

U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez on Friday said that federal and state restoration plans have changed and that the company has "not seen any serious interest in purchasing a large amount of land for which there is no plan or project."

The Everglades Coalition - which includes more than 50 environmental groups and other advocacy organizations - plans to try to change that. The group announced that lobbying for the state to buy those 46,800 acres would be the coalition's top priority in 2015.

Acquiring more land to store and clean up water that rains down on South Florida each year could help send more water to the Everglades, which suffers from decades of draining to make way for farming and development. Sending more of that water south to the Everglades helps replenish both wildlife habitat and South Florida's supply of drinking water.

Also, restoring more Lake Okeechobee water flows south to the Everglades could lessen flood-control discharges from the lake out to sea. Draining hundreds of billions of gallons of lake water toward the coast, as occurred during 2013, can hurt coastal fishing grounds and fuel algae blooms that make waterways unsafe for swimming.

"Time is of the essence," said Cara Capp, of the National Parks Conservation Association, who also heads the Everglades Coalition. "[The land] should be in the state's ownership."

If bought at the same per-acre price as the 2010 deal, buying all 46,800 acres would cost taxpayers about \$350 million.

That cost could go up or down depending on updated land appraisals that would likely be part of a land buy. State officials could also try to buy less than 46,800 acres.

But another high-dollar sugar land deal could face hurdles getting support from state lawmakers.

Former Gov. Charlie Crist bypassed the Legislature when his administration negotiated the previous deal for U.S. Sugar land that the water management district bought in 2010. Afterward, the Legislature slashed the water management district's budget by 30 percent.

Also, Gov. Rick Scott when he first ran for office in 2010 opposed Crist's U.S. Sugar deal. Since then, Everglades restoration proposals advocated by Scott have involved making use of land already owned by the public.

Everglades Coalition representatives say they have the public support they need to win over support in Tallahassee for another Everglades land buy.

Florida voters in November overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment intended to commit a portion of fees levied on real estate sales to helping the state pay for buying land for environmental projects.

Voter approval of Amendment One doesn't mean there will be state support for buying more U.S. Sugar land, said Sanchez, of U.S. Sugar.

"Surely the preference for Amendment One Funding will be the significant number of shovel-ready projects that will benefit the Everglades, estuaries, lakes, springs and beaches and other environmental priorities all over the state," Sanchez said.

The Everglades Coalition gathered in Key Largo starting Thursday and wraps up Sunday for its 30th annual conference, bringing together a host of environmental groups and state and federal leaders to discuss ways to help Florida's famed River of Grass.

During the past 15 years, much of the coalition's efforts have focused on trying jump start state and federal efforts for slow-moving Everglades restoration.

To try to reverse the environmentally harmful consequences of South Florida flood control and pollution, the state and federal government in 2000 agreed to an Everglades restoration plan that calls for redirecting more water to the Everglades.

It has already cost taxpayers about \$3.1 billion to build more places to store water that rains down during storms as well as treatment areas to clean up pollutants washing in from farmland, lawns and roads.

While progress has been made, none of the Everglades restoration proposed in the 2000 plan have been finished.

"The Everglades restoration for many years has crawled along," South Florida Water Management District Executive Director Blake Guillory told the Everglades Coalition. "We have a lot more to do."

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