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### Dexter W. Lehtinen: This plan helps politicians, does little for River of Grass

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After his first and second new "visions" for Everglades restoration collapsed, Gov. Charlie Crist announced a third ill-conceived idea for buying U.S. Sugar Corp. land. In a supreme irony, Everglades restoration is suffering from its own popularity.

Because continued implementation of ongoing restoration projects produces no new "credit" for the politicians who assume office after it began, such politicians choose to stop ongoing work, substituting a different approach for which they alone can claim credit. These officials refuse to simply implement critical restoration plans; they refuse to simply "carry a message to Garcia" in Everglades restoration (the famous phrase for working without fanfare or excuses, derived from the remarkable delivery of a message from President William McKinley to Cuban leader Gen. Calixto Garcia in 1898).

Implementation of comprehensively planned projects is the key to Everglades restoration, but press releases about "new initiatives" are the key to political credit. The jockeying for political benefit is the underlying element of Crist's new vision — a vision that lacks specificity, cannot be achieved for at least two decades and abandons current restoration projects in midstream.

The land purchase is bad planning and bad restoration. First, land acquisition alone is inadequate. There is no plan for utilization of the land in any rational way. There is no demonstration that the land is needed at these locations. It's little more than "impulse buy" at the supermarket check-out — with public money.

Second, the proposed contract terms do not reflect the vision's claims. This is the third version of the vision, which started with acquiring all U.S. Sugar Corp. land and assets; then it changed to buying 184,000 acres only; and now it has changed to buying 72,500 acres with a "right" to buy a remaining 107,500 acres at an unspecified market price.

Of this 72,500 acres, 32,000 acres are in citrus production, poorly located, disconnected and of little use in restoration. U.S. Sugar retains the right to sell this remaining land to private buyers at any price; the government can acquire the land only by matching the price.

Furthermore, if the government does not buy the remaining land within the 20-year period (at an unspecified market price), U.S. Sugar has a right during that period to remain on 30,000 acres of the sugar-cane land that the government did buy.

Third, there is no additional money to buy the remaining 107,500 acres or to build the construction projects, which are necessary to achieve any benefits to the Everglades. The 107,500 acres would cost at least \$850 million. The cost of land acquisition alone (\$1.35 billion) would be less than 20 percent of final costs after engineering and construction of facilities (at least \$5 billion). The debt service for bonds for the 72,500-acre land purchase alone will block future funding for land acquisition and construction.

Fourth, present restoration projects are being stopped to divert funds to this future proposal. For example, a reservoir that's critical to the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan project (for which the government already has spent more than \$250 million), has been abandoned in midconstruction. The Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries projects also are stopped. These projects provide more water storage than the new proposal.

The unspecified "River of Grass" proposal is at least 20 years from any restoration effect on the ground. Even 10 years is a death warrant for the Everglades (a recent Environmental Protection Agency report indicates that an additional 16 percent of Everglades soil exceeds CERP goals every 10 years).

This proposed land purchase amounts to nothing more than restoration rhetoric, masking special-interest pork, while restoration reality sinks deeper into a quicksand of political exploitation. It's time to stop proposing new, unanalyzed schemes; it's time to get on with the work of carrying out sound existing projects.

It's time to send "a message to Garcia" in Everglades restoration.

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