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Karl Wickstrom: Imagine a reserve in the Everglades

Karl Wickstrom, guest columnist
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The people of Florida have a truly amazing opportunity.

Purchase 180,000 acres of overdrained and tainted sugar land to restore Mother Nature's long-lost River of Grass.

That's a dream we've nurtured for a half-century.

The deal to buy U.S. Sugar's property will reconnect Lake Okeechobee to the Everglades, save the estuaries from horrendous discharges, recharge ground-water systems and reduce phosphorous fertilizer pollution by hundreds and hundreds of tons.

Those benefits alone are more than enough to justify the buy, at a price that will be viewed as a can't-miss bargain compared to the public good.

And we'd suggest this icing on the cake:

The River of Grass Restoration Reserve.

This new reserve could transform the immense property (the size of many state parks combined) into a natural wonderland, while at the same time providing vitally needed basic benefits of the “missing link” flowway.

Imagine a network of waterways and marshes offering all kinds of public uses, such as:

- Many miles of canoe and kayak access.
- Nature trails rarely enjoyed anywhere.
- World-class birding, drawing millions.
- Extraordinary freshwater fishing.
- Duck hunting supreme in certain areas.
- Vistas of 'Glades life in large scale.
- Important educational centers.

Lake communities could benefit in many ways. It could be a significant part of a needed economic program to aid folks on the south side of the lake.

The Reserve idea hatched after we visited Guana Reserve just north of St. Augustine. Guana covers 55,000 acres and offers many of the same features we envision for the River of Grass Reserve. Take a look at nerrs.noaa.gov/GTM

It's exciting to think of the possibilities.

First, of course, we must acquire the sugar land.

There are naysayers picking at details of the purchase. The hidden hand of certain agricultural interests is in the background. And some observers worry that U.S. Sugar owners will make an undeserved bundle in the deal.

Actually the price equivalent to \$7,000 an acre is something the public can live with, especially considering that there is no real alternative.

The contract closing is slated for next year. Get it done, we say, and tie in a River of Grass Restoration Reserve that would gain worldwide appeal and significance.

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