



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

OPINION

February 5, 2013

Land is Essential to Environmental Restoration

Across South Florida, access to land in critical locations is the first step toward achieving Everglades restoration. Construction of projects capable of storing, cleaning and moving water through the region's managed system of canals – and around our thriving cities and productive farmlands – are the primary tools that will improve Florida's natural areas. Getting them built is crucial to restoration success.

Over the past two decades, the South Florida Water Management District has taken significant steps toward acquiring land. Together with state funding, we have invested \$1.3 billion for more than half of the 405,000 acres needed for projects in the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). In 2010, the District also invested \$194 million to acquire close to 27,000 acres of citrus and sugarcane land for restoration.

These are large, public land holdings, and all of them will eventually serve us well. My goal, as executive director, is to turn "eventually" into *now* for the priority projects needed to improve South Florida's environment.

Without question, Everglades water quality is a top priority. Under the leadership of Governor Scott, the state's Restoration Strategies plan achieved consensus with federal agencies on a suite of projects to meet state water quality standards. It was an historic accomplishment. Now we are putting the plan into action.

The District has most of the lands needed for the Restoration Strategies, including 15,000 acres for storage south of Lake Okeechobee and 18,000 acres for wetland restoration. We also have other parcels that will be exchanged (without additional cost) for 6,500 acres needed near the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge to expand the District's stormwater treatment areas.

Recent criticism targeted this land exchange. It also targeted a cost-effective acquisition opportunity – at a 56 percent discount off the appraised value – for acreage near Lake Hicpochee to improve conditions in the Caloosahatchee watershed.

Frankly, it's discouraging to be criticized for progress. In today's challenging economic climate, the District has shovel-ready plans and funding in place to move forward with project construction. We have worked diligently with private landowners to acquire

sites in key locations, including the creative approach of lease extensions on public land not currently needed for projects.

This approach serves Florida's taxpayers extremely well. First, it puts critical tracts of land into public ownership at no additional expense – as with the land exchange, or at significant cost savings – as with the 56 percent discount.

Second, leases on the state-owned parcels bring in revenues, helping to fund the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's management of state lands.

Third, lessees are also permittees, which means they must continue limiting nutrient and stormwater runoff, managing fertilizer application, controlling erosion and other best management practices. For the 17th consecutive year, water flowing from farmlands in the 470,000-acre Everglades Agricultural Area more than achieved the required phosphorus reductions, with a 71-percent reduction this past year. To improve even further, the Restoration Strategies plan includes sub-regional source controls that will address areas that can benefit from more intensive efforts.

Is there more that can be done? Always. Is this agency committed to constant improvement? Absolutely. This land acquisition approach puts some of South Florida's largest land owners at the table with us as restoration partners. Strategic negotiations, as achieved this month, allow us to maximize public dollars toward restoration goals. This fully serves the public interest and is a continued step forward.

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