



The River of Grass land acquisition offers an unprecedented opportunity to truly realize the full ecological benefits that Everglades restoration efforts are meant to achieve. The initial acquisition of 73,000 acres of land from the U.S. Sugar Corporation (USSC), including extensive acreage in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) south of Lake Okeechobee will provide economic, environmental and water security for Florida.

The acquisition is a vital opportunity to store, treat and convey water in a manner that more naturally mimics nature's hydrologic patterns, protecting Florida's environment and economy from the impacts of droughts and floods. The projects made possible by the purchase will reduce competition for water supply, as well as benefit recreation and tourism to the great benefit of Florida's economy.

Purchase and use of USSC lands is also by far the most cost-efficient approach to moving, storing and treating water moving from Lake Okeechobee and the EAA to the Everglades. Restoration of the Everglades has long been hindered as a result of insufficient land in the EAA with which to store and treat water. Along with other planned projects, water storage and treatment is vital to recovering Lake Okeechobee and the northern estuaries, reviving flows through the historic river of grass, and getting fresh water to the parched marshes of Everglades National Park.

Benefits of a Phased Purchase

In April 2009, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and Florida Governor Charlie Crist announced a strategy to move forward with the monumental River of Grass acquisition in spite of a difficult economic environment by completing the purchase in phases.

The SFWMD will initially acquire 73,000 acres of land, almost half of which will become available for use in restoration projects within a year after

closing. Of the approximate 107,500 acres remaining from the original purchase plan, the SFWMD will have an exclusive option to purchase these additional lands (or portions of) within three years of closing. This prevents the land from being sold piecemeal to other parties and enables Florida and USSC to continue partnering in this endeavor. The SFWMD will then retain the option to purchase any remaining lands for ten years after closing. USSC will manage the lands until actually needed for Everglades projects, reducing SFWMD costs. Surplus lands from the USSC deal not needed for Everglades Restoration will be available for purchase or lease to the agricultural community.

The River of Grass purchase and leaseback are intended to work together to secure and maintain much of the land that is needed for restoration and water management while avoiding the complexities of dealing with competing land owners.

Snail Kite





Water Security for Lake O and Northern Estuaries

Acquiring acreage south of Lake Okeechobee will relieve pressure on the Hoover Dike and allow vast amounts of polluted lake water to be moved south for treatment and storage. The lake water will then become a more reliable source for the parched Everglades and for urban water supply. Other farms within the EAA will also benefit from increased water security.

The River of Grass acquisition will secure a future for endangered wildlife such as the Everglades (snail) kite, which nests near Lake Okeechobee, and has faced nesting failures resulting from unnatural and extreme fluctuations in lake water levels. Sending water south in a manner that more closely replicates the natural system will also provide water and ecological security to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries, dramatically reducing the need for large harmful discharges in the wet season. This in turn will improve water quality and help fishing, hunting, and bird watching, which are important parts of Florida's economy.

Benefits to the Historic River of Grass

The Everglades Protection Area, including the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, has also suffered greatly from an altered water management system and high levels of nutrients from agricultural and urban runoff. The degradation of wildlife habitat south of Lake Okeechobee has greatly diminished wading bird populations.

The USCC lands will provide a means to expand Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs). Recent filings in federal litigation concerning Everglades water quality argue convincingly that extensive expansion of STAs is necessary. Fresh flowing water, delivered in more natural cycles, is necessary for the Everglades to function as a healthy ecosystem. The River of Grass acquisition and subsequent restoration projects will allow water of sufficient quantity and quality to be delivered to the natural system, helping to bring the ecosystem back from its current precarious tipping point.

Securing the Southern Everglades & Florida Bay

The southern end of the Everglades ecosystem once harbored the greatest abundance of wildlife in the Everglades. Located at the end of a chain of habitat destruction, the southern end of the system has long suffered a cascade of impacts from alterations throughout the entire Everglades ecosystem. Habitat degradation in the southern mangrove zone and Florida Bay is documented by declines of fish-eating birds (e.g. pelicans, osprey, eagles), predatory fishes, alligators, and crocodiles. In 2008, Audubon scientists recorded the worst roseate spoonbill nesting season in Florida Bay since the 1960s, and have determined that this demonstrates the need for greater fresh water flows through the Everglades.

Downstream ecosystems will benefit immensely from the opportunity, provided by USSC lands, to store and treat greater quantities of water. Until we create sufficient storage capacity, the southern part of the system will continue to degrade as a result of receiving too little fresh water. Other restoration projects, now being planned or built to benefit Everglades National Park and Florida Bay, will be enhanced and more effective if the River of Grass acquisition is completed.

Securing Natural Florida for People & Wildlife

Audubon scientists and a vast array of stakeholders are participating in the open process of determining the best restoration uses of the land acquired. Appropriate water storage and STAs on these 73,000 acres will deliver better system-wide restoration performance, enhancing the benefits provided by the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP). The ability to use extensive land in the EAA to store excess water during wet periods, clean it, and deliver it where and when it is needed most will secure water for south Florida's population during dry periods and protect coastal communities during wet seasons. This monumental conservation land initiative will provide far-reaching and diverse benefits.

Everglades advocates urge the public and decision-makers to support the River of Grass acquisition as a smart restoration decision, which will benefit the public and the health of the Everglades