

# NEWS

June 24, 2008

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## **Everglades Foundation: Massive Land Acquisition is “Priceless, Breathtaking Opportunity to Save Fabled River of Grass”**

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- The Everglades Foundation, the nation’s leading Everglades advocacy and science organization called a plan to purchase 187,000 acres of strategically located agricultural land for Everglades restoration an achievement of “breathtaking significance and priceless value.” The foundation declared the plan “a once-in-a-generation opportunity that will move Everglades restoration forward beyond all expectations” and lauded Gov. Charlie Crist for his “bold action that will ensure the sustainability of the Everglades and affected estuaries.”

At the direction of Gov. Crist, the South Florida Water Management District today announced it will negotiate the purchase of 187,000 acres – an area more than twice the size of Orlando from U.S. Sugar Corporation, then swap and consolidate lands into large tracts, dedicating the land to Everglades restoration. Everglades Foundation scientists say this has the dual benefit of protecting the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries from damaging freshwater releases while providing an enormous supply of clean water, the lifeblood of the Everglades, to sustain those fragile wetlands during droughts. Moreover, it will allow the District to expand the manmade marshes that clean up water flowing into Lake Okeechobee and into the Everglades.

“The significance of this cannot be overstated,” said Everglades Foundation Senior Scientist Dr. Tom Van Lent. “This acquisition will provide the land needed to construct a reliable water supply for the Everglades much faster and at a lower cost than previously envisioned. It will allow us to eliminate about 85 percent of the damaging releases to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee, and it will do so decades earlier than we thought possible.”

After more than 15 years of public advocacy and frequent policy battles with the sugar industry, the announcement united longtime adversaries behind a common purpose. “This is truly a historic moment in the life of the Everglades, when bitter adversaries united to support an unprecedented and unexpected good. Unthinkable progress is now possible, and all in our lifetimes,” said Everglades Foundation Chief Executive Officer Kirk Fordham. “This is a moment for the record books, a priceless gift for the generations that will follow us.”

The Everglades, which originally comprised 4,000 square miles, now is less than half that size. The population of 2 million wading birds that once inhabited the region is down to 10 percent of its original size. Marjory Stoneman Douglas' celebrated "River of Grass" is home to 67 threatened or endangered species, whose survival will be greatly aided by the massive addition of land and clean water.

"America's River of Grass sustains life for so much and so many. Today it receives its lifeline," said Everglades Foundation Vice Chair and President of the Everglades Trust Mary Barley. "A restored and sustained Everglades is no longer a dream. History will record this action as the point that brought it within our reach."

The additional storage that this land purchase makes possible will correct one of the major problems in the Everglades: currently, drainage and water diversions cause the Everglades to dry up too often, preventing fish and other essential elements of the Everglades food web from surviving. Wildfires are too frequent. Peat soils formed over thousands of years are lost in an afternoon. This land acquisition will make it possible to provide water during droughts, which will protect tree islands and increase fish populations, sustaining larger wading bird populations, more alligators and other unique flora and fauna in the Everglades.

Furthermore, water used to sustain the Everglades during droughts will be the same water now flushed out to the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico during wet years, causing massive damage to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries along the way. These releases from Lake Okeechobee cover oyster beds with layers of muck, kill estuarine plants and animals that cannot tolerate prolonged exposure to freshwater and cause algae blooms that deplete the water of vital oxygen, release toxins and block sunlight. This land acquisition will allow Florida to protect estuaries decades sooner and build projects at a scale large enough to make a tremendous difference.

**The Everglades Foundation, Inc.** is a 501(c) (3) not-for-profit, charitable organization dedicated to advancing an understanding of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem and its irreplaceable environmental and economic value. Since 1993, the Everglades Foundation has been doing its part to help environmental organizations develop the staff and tools necessary to tackle Everglades restoration challenges. The Everglades Foundation works to protect the Everglades through environmental leadership, scientific expertise, and policy experience.

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