

US Sugar Land Acquisition:

Frequently Asked Questions



How much land will be purchased?

The South Florida Water Management District will purchase 187,000 acres of land from U.S. Sugar.

What will be done with the purchased land?

The highest priorities should be to use the land to (a) clean up the polluted water entering Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades, (b) significantly decrease the damaging discharges of freshwater into the St Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries and (c) provide a reliable water supply to the Everglades.

How much water storage will this acquisition make possible?

This plan has the potential for providing about 1 million acre-ft of new water storage. One acre-ft of water is about 325,000 gallons, which is about the amount of water that the typical Florida family of 4 uses in their homes, yards and swimming pools in a year.

One million acre-feet of water is:

- a. 325 trillion gallons of water
- b. Enough water to fill about 500,000 Olympic size swimming pools
- c. Spread one foot deep, enough to cover the state of Rhode Island

Why not store water somewhere else?

First, much of the acquired land is between Lake Okeechobee and the Everglades. Its location is ideal for clean up of water sent to the Everglades and for delivering water to the Everglades in the most efficient manner possible. Second, at \$9,400/acre, the land costs are almost certainly less than any viable alternatives. Third, it is the one place in south Florida where large, undeveloped tracts of land still exist, making design simpler and construction and operation costs less. This allows economies of scale not possible elsewhere.

How will this benefit the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers?

With an additional 1 million acre-ft of water storage, we could potentially eliminate 85% of the damaging releases from Lake Okeechobee to the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee estuaries. Moreover, if releases are made, their potential damage will be dramatically decreased.

How will this benefit the Everglades?

The Everglades will gain a supply of water that will sustain the “River of Grass” as a flowing, shallow river during a moderate drought. Currently, water managers do their best to provide unrestricted water use to urban and agricultural users in a “1-in-10-year” drought. This gives the Everglades a similar benefit.

The improved water storage capability would correct one of the major problems in the Everglades. Currently, drainage for flood control and over-allocation of water cause the Everglades to dry up too often, so fish and other essential elements of the Everglades food web can’t survive. Severe wildfires are too frequent; tree islands, which cannot tolerate fire, get badly damaged; and the peat soils, formed over thousands of years, are lost in a few days. By providing water during droughts, we can protect tree islands and increase fish populations, which will, in turn, sustain larger wading bird populations, as well as more alligators and other unique flora and fauna in the Everglades.

Will it lower the ultimate cost of restoration?

We believe the land acquisition will decrease the overall cost of restoration. Current efforts rely heavily on costly, untested aquifer storage and recovery (ASR) methods. With the addition of land, water storage efforts will be more reliable and almost certainly less expensive.

Is this all we have to do to restore the Everglades?

While this land acquisition is a monumental and historic step, there are additional pieces that need to be in place. The basic recipe for restoration of the Everglades and estuaries is to provide a secure, clean water supply to sustain the ecosystem during drought periods and remove the artificial barriers to flow in the Everglades, such as the Tamiami Trail and various canals and levees throughout South Florida. Governor Charlie Crist has secured most of the land needed to accomplish the first phase, but more needs to be done. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must refocus and direct their energies to restoring sheetflow.

What about the federal government?

Lands and waters managed and owned by the federal government will benefit greatly from the land acquisition. If the new storage and filtration marshes are built, the primary beneficiaries will be the Okeechobee Waterway (Lake Okeechobee and the St Lucie and Caloosahatchee Rivers), Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and the Everglades National Park. This gigantic boost in the State of Florida’s investment in restoration efforts should incentivize the federal government to fulfill their commitment to the 50-50 cost-sharing agreement originally enacted into law under the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan.