

# Florida, federal officials reach deal for Everglades restoration

August 14 2009, By Curtis Morgan

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Water managers and the White House signed a crucial contract Thursday that promises a much-needed infusion of federal dollars for the Everglades.

The agreement ends years of dispute over splitting up a ballooning restoration bill, which is expected to top \$22 billion, and clears the way to quickly -- and finally -- begin long-stalled construction work.

The "master agreement" details how the South Florida Water Management District and the Army Corps of Engineers will share costs and duties for 68 projects Congress approved in 2000 to restore the natural flow of the River of Grass.

Both sides hailed the agreement -- reached when the Obama administration relented in a dispute over land values likely to shift as much as a half-billion dollars onto the federal ledger -- as a breakthrough that should move restoration from talk to action.

"This is not just a boring, silly administrative milestone," said Shannon Estenoz, a member of the water district's governing board. "This is the place where we pick up speed. I want to get out my boots and hard hat and start attending ground-breakings."

Terrence "Rock" Salt, a deputy assistant secretary of the Army who oversees the Corps, said construction could begin within months, starting with reclamation of 55,000 acres in the Picayune Strand, site of a

Southwest Florida development that flopped decades ago. The Corps has \$41 million in stimulus funding for that job.

"We now have the agreements in place that will support Everglades projects that were, only a decade ago, little more than hopes and dreams," said Salt, who signed the document for the White House.

Over the next two years, the Obama administration has budgeted or is seeking congressional approval for almost a half-billion dollars to begin restoration projects, including ones to restore freshwater flows to Biscayne Bay coastal wetlands, overhaul the C-111 canal to keep more water in Everglades National Park and build a reservoir to bolster Broward County's water supply and limit seepage from adjacent Everglades marshes.

Down the road, the agreement also could potentially open the door for federal help to complete Florida Gov. Charlie Crist's controversial \$536 million deal to buy 73,000 acres from the U.S. Sugar Corp. and convert them to massive reservoirs and pollution-treatment marshes.

In a court challenge, the Miccosukee Tribe and rival grower Florida Crystals Corp. have argued the land deal would delay cleanup, possibly by decades, because the district doesn't have money to build anything on the land. Estimates for conceptual designs range as high as \$17 billion.

In past years, the Corps firmly opposed bankrolling projects primarily intended to clean up farm pollution, calling that a state responsibility. Both sides signaled that stance has been relaxed.

Salt said the Corps would decide whether to help pay for water-quality projects on a case-by-case basis, and he expected to discuss plans for the land with the district.

Board Chairman Eric Buermann said there already have been preliminary discussions about sharing costs for future projects. He also argued that the land deal would send a message to congressional critics of the so-far-sluggish restoration effort, underscoring Florida's commitment to getting the job done. "This is a state that is bellying up to the bar," he said.

The restoration plan calls for splitting costs 50-50, with the district covering its half with land purchases and the Corps footing most construction costs. But setting land value has proved to be a major source of friction.

The Corps normally values land a state contributes at market prices. But for the Everglades effort, the state initially agreed to use original, and often cheaper, purchase prices. With delays sending construction estimates soaring, water managers -- outspending the federal government six-to-one in the Glades -- pressed to change the terms.

White House budget managers, concerned about hundreds of millions of dollars added to federal costs, balked. But take-it-or-leave-it letters the district board sent to the White House last month sparked a flurry of high-level negotiations, with the Corps agreeing to calculate land at market prices for most projects.

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