

Everglades deal in jeopardy after judge's ruling

April 1 2010, By BRIAN SKOLOFF , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Gov. Charlie Crist's grand plan to revive the dying Florida Everglades by buying back the land is in jeopardy after a federal judge Wednesday ordered the state to resume construction on a multimillion-dollar restoration project.

Work on the 25-square-mile reservoir - the largest of its kind in the world - was halted in 2008 after water managers said a lawsuit from environmentalists could hinder their ability to complete the project.

The decision to stop work came just a month before Crist announced a plan to spend \$1.75 billion to buy all of U.S. Sugar Corp.'s 180,000 acres and assets in the Everglades.

Crist's plan has since been scaled down, because of the economy, to \$536 million for 73,000 acres from U.S. Sugar, the nation's largest cane sugar producer.

U.S District Judge Federico Moreno's ruling on Wednesday could now end it all.

Moreno granted a motion from the Miccosukee Indians, who live in the Everglades, to force the South Florida Water Management District to resume construction of the massive reservoir with an estimated cost of up to \$800 million.

The district oversees the state's Everglades [restoration efforts](#) and has

said previously it likely couldn't afford both the U.S. Sugar deal and the reservoir.

"The court is now uncertain as to what role the downsized land purchase will play in Everglades restoration," Moreno wrote in his ruling.

"Meanwhile, the projects devised years ago ... are waiting in standstill."

The judge agreed with the Miccosukee that halting the reservoir project "despite the best efforts of Governor Crist" would further pollute the tribe's land.

Crist's office said it was reviewing the ruling to determine the next step. The district also said it was reviewing the ruling.

"This puts Everglades restoration back on track," said tribe attorney Dexter Lehtinen. "If they're going to do the land deal, it's got to now be in addition to the restoration projects they promised, so they've got a huge problem."

U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez said the ruling does not preclude the state from purchasing lands that would allow for more effectively designed restoration projects.

The sugar land deal also faces legal challenges. The state Supreme Court is set to hear the case next week.

If the deal falls through, it could serve up another blow to Crist's campaign for U.S. Senate. He is locked in a close contest for the GOP nomination, and the U.S. Sugar purchase was set to be a cornerstone of his legacy.

The Everglades have been dying for decades from the intrusion of farms and development, dissected by dikes, dams and canals, effectively

draining much of the swamp and polluting it with fertilizers and urban runoff. The state and federal governments' efforts to restore the wetlands have been stymied for years by funding shortfalls, legal challenges and political bickering.

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