

Everglades Restoration Is Expensive and South Florida Water Management Agency is Doing a Good Job, Secretary Salazar

By Rosa Schechter

October 20, 2011

Florida's environmental issues -- such as the status of the Everglades Restoration -- is going to be in the spotlight now not only because the convention of the Society of Environmental Journalists is being held here, but because they invited U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar to speak. Salazar gave a talk to the environmental journalists Wednesday night at the Miami Inter-Continental Hotel's Grand Ballroom.

Salazar Talks about the Everglades Restoration

And what was Secretary Salazar addressing? He focused on the Florida Everglades Restoration as an example of conservation projects and their pros and cons. His entire speech is available to read online; here's an excerpt:

Finally, I ask for your help explaining what is at stake for conservation at this moment in our history.

Here in the Everglades, we have undertaken the largest watershed restoration project on the planet.

And over the last two years, the Obama Administration, including the Department of the Interior and our colleagues at EPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, USDA and others have moved mountains to provide additional funding and to move Everglades restoration from planning to on-the-ground results.

Tomorrow morning, we'll see some of that work underway at the Tamiami Trail, where contractors and heavy machinery are helping remove a major barrier that has prevented fresh water from entering Everglades National Park.

We will soon see the River of Grass flow again.

Tomorrow, we'll also talk more about a new conservation initiative, Everglades Headwaters National Wildlife Refuge, that will preserve the community's ranching heritage and conserve the headwaters and fish and wildlife of the Everglades.

And we'll discuss the work we have underway to plan for the next ten years of Everglades' restoration.

But the remarkable progress we have made on conservation in the last two and a half years - here in the Everglades and around the country - is in jeopardy.

It's not simply a matter of budgets, although the House Republican budget would force the closure of an estimated 100 national wildlife refuges to the public.

It's also about a fundamentally different vision of who we are as a nation and what we can do as a people.

President Obama and I believe that when times are tough, Americans stand together, work together, and do big things together.

But we are faced with a competing vision of an America where – when times are tough – it's every person for themselves... where we shy away from our goals... where we say: "that mountain is too tall."

And that's why you see attacks on water settlements and river restorations that have been decades in the making.

Or it's why you see folks turning their backs on the promise of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

We should be reinvesting revenues from oil and gas development in the permanent protection of rivers, parks, and wildlife habitat.

Its common sense – and it was a promise we made more than 40 years ago. Yet those revenues are not getting to where they should be.

Sixteen billion dollars is owed to the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

So if you're a hunter in this country, you've been shorted. If you're a fisherman, you've been shorted. And if you're an energy company, you've been shorted.

The American people expect more from their leaders, but they have to know what's happening.

That's why you, as journalists, carry a tremendous responsibility.

Fifteen months ago, you helped the world understand what happened in the Gulf of Mexico, and you helped mobilize an army of citizens and public servants to respond.

The challenges we face today deserve the same relentless attention, careful reporting, and clear explanation.

The American people are interested in the great outdoors. They are passionate. And they need your expertise to bring them the information they seek.

Meanwhile, out in the Florida Everglades, U.S. Sugar is Still Farming the Land It Sold to Florida

In last week's [Sun Sentinel](#), you will read about U.S. Sugar Corporation operating around 27,000 acres as sugar cane fields and citrus groves, even though that land was part of a huge (\$197 million) land deal it made with the South Florida Water Management District last October.

SFWMD has a goal of using the land for projects designed to clean up polluted storm water, which would boost the restoration efforts of the Florida Everglades. A noble cause, clean water for a flourishing Everglades.

Sure It Is: SFWMD Leased the Land Because It Needed Cash Fast After Taxes Were Cut

What's not being discussed here is funding. Money. After Governor Scott cut property taxes last year, the South Florida Water Management District did a smart move to keep its doors open in the face of huge government budget cuts, and invited agricultural operators (including citrus growers) to lease up to 18,000 acres of the 26,800 acres it purchased from U.S. Sugar last fall, the land deal described in the Sun Sentinel article last week.

As we discussed back in March:

The proposed leasehold is located in Hendry County -- and it was originally targeted to be part of the first restoration efforts. The idea was to use this prime farm land, ideal for citrus and sugar cane, for cleaning and storing storm waters that then be used as a needed water supply in the bigger plan to restore Everglades acreage. Now, the Water District will allow the land to return to its use for growing crops for at least the short term.

What's going on here?

Well, Governor Rick Scott is looking at numbers and his idea to cut property taxes means that the South Florida Water Management District has to find some revenue - fast - or face letting people go, as well as putting a hold on the Everglades restoration.

So, the Water District is trying to avoid cutting its staff by letting these 18,000 acres return to growing oranges or sugar instead of setting there for a couple of years. Environmental activists are not going to be happy about this delay in the Everglades project, but that doesn't seem to be a big priority in the state capital right now -- and from a land development perspective, the Water District seems to be making a very smart move.

Here's the Bottom Line: Florida is in a Economic Crisis and Everglades Restoration Costs Lots of Money

It's always interesting when fingers start pointing at purported evildoers when environmental issues pop up. Where are the villains here? Florida is in a terrible financial situation and fighting for survival -- and the South Florida Water Management Agency didn't get funding from taxes like it had in the past.

Property tax revenue is down, because of ForeclosureGate and the lack of Land Development and crashing market values and other things. Money can get complicated fast.

So now, eyes turn to the Everglades. Who in Florida doesn't want the Everglades protected? The question is: where do we find the money to accomplish that task when Florida's economy is in the condition that it is?

South Florida Water Management Agency did buy the land, after all. Leases until the SFWMA can find funding to do more doesn't seem like a bad idea, it's a smart move.