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CONGRESSMAN KENDRICK B. MEEK

March 8, 2010

The Honorable Charlie Crist
Governor, State of Florida
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe Street
Tallahassee, Florida 32399

Dear Governor Crist,

Today's front page article in *The New York Times* raises serious questions concerning the state of Florida's effort on Everglades restoration. I will leave it to others to dissect the wide ranging host of ethical and legal questions the article poses, as well as the complicated web of relationships among elected officials, lobbyists, corporations, and outside interests involved in this agreement, but I am most concerned with the future of our state, its citizens and our natural resources.

The Florida delegation in congress secured $135 million for Everglades restoration in the FY 2010 Appropriations bill. Given today's economic reality, the federal government and congressional appropriators may be reluctant to help fund Everglades restoration projects if they have serious misgivings about the agreement. These hard to come by federal dollars can be directed to other worthwhile projects in other states that will not result in a questionable front page article in a major daily newspaper. To federal decision makers, today's item will give them pause for thought.

<u>We need to make sure that restoration funding is used in the most effective way possible so that land that is purchased can be properly restored, while restoration projects that have already begun are not stopped before completion because of a lack of funding</u>.

At issue is the appraisal process in valuating the land for sale, which begets the question: Were these fair-market appraisals of United States Sugar land, and is Florida overpaying for this land? If the answer to this question is yes, could some of these funds that might be overpaid to U.S. Sugar be better used?

According to *The Times*: "But internal district documents revealed that the land had been overvalued by the two firms that performed the independent appraisals. Both relied on figures from 2004 to 2008, when a speculative real estate market had prices

soaring." And as one land appraiser, Mr. Woody Hanson of Ft. Myers told *The Times*, "When I had heard that number [$1.3 billion], I couldn't swallow it – it was an unbelievable number. Then I looked closely at the appraisals to test them for reasonableness and, wow, there is just no way it makes sense for the taxpayers."

In the long list of troubling concerns this article raises, that latter question is of the greatest worry to me. If the merits of this agreement remain strong, and I am not calling into question the validity of the deal, is Florida overpaying for U.S. Sugar land? Florida residents have consistently shown support for Everglades restoration and it is imperative that the money is used in the most effective way possible and not squandered on over-valued land.

The Florida Everglades is a favorite ecotourism destination that plays a vital role in our state's economy. It is where major companies including U.S. Sugar and Florida Crystals employ Floridians, and it is also home to the Miccosukee Tribe whose connection to this land is longstanding. That certain groups were excluded from this agreement further speaks to the non-inclusive nature of this agreement, and raises important questions about the merits of the deal that was struck.

I look forward to receiving your letter in receipt, explaining how in your estimation, Florida is paying a fair market price for this land, and if indeed we are not, how do we resolve this problem?

I am, sincerely yours

KENDRICK B. MEEK
Member of Congress