

Don't let ranch go

Our position: It's important to Central Florida to have the St. Johns district buy Holland Ranch.

Will the headwaters of the meandering Econlockhatchee River be sold off to developers, bulldozed for new rooftops and strip malls? Or will a 5,200-acre tract known as the Holland Ranch forever remain wild, a vast expanse of swamp, woodlands and scrub that protects downstream residents from flooding?

That question could be decided Wednesday, when the St. Johns River Water Management District is scheduled to vote on whether to buy the property in partnership with Orange County. The choice is a no-brainer.

For years, the district and Orange County have coveted the land for its environmental importance and flood-protection value. But it wasn't until last month that Orange County Chairman Rich Crotty was able to seal a \$7.5 million purchase deal for half the acreage. The other half will also be kept wild, turned into a so-called wetlands mitigation bank by the owner. That allows developers to fill wetlands in other areas in exchange for preserving valuable wetlands on the Holland Ranch property.

Ideally, the entire tract would be purchased by taxpayers and opened to the public as a nature preserve. Just such a plan collapsed last summer, however, when the state pulled its financial support, citing budget woes. That problem was further exacerbated by the Sept. 11 tragedy. And it's not likely to get better any time soon.



GEORGE SKENE/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Unless the district moves ahead now with Mr. Crotty's plan, there's little question but that the ranch will be lost to escalating development pressures in that part of the county. Now is not the time for additional appraisals or bureaucratic hand-wringing. Now is the time for water managers to purchase the land and begin in earnest the long process of protecting the Econ from bulldozers of destruction.