Glades activists back Crist

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TALLAHASSEE – For years, U.S. Sen. Bob Graham has been lauded by environmentalists, who praise his work to restore the Florida Everglades.

But Thursday, a prominent environmental group endorsed opponent Charlie Crist, charging that Graham has become too cozy with sugar growers.

"'It's Halloween time. If Graham were going to put on a suit, he'd probably come disguised as an environmentalist," snapped Mary Barley, who heads the group Save Our Everglades.

Graham has been endorsed by groups such as the Florida chapter of the Sierra Club and the Florida League of Conservation Voters, which called him an "environmental stalwart."

"'If Bob Graham isn't a friend of the Everglades, I don't know who is," said Graham's campaign spokesman, Chris Hand.

Save Our Everglades members are miffed because Graham opposed a penny-per-pound tax that the group wanted to add to Florida's Constitution. The idea was rejected by voters in 1996. The penny would have been charged to sugar companies, not to consumers, and the money would have gone to restore the Everglades.

Crist, who has pledged to cut taxes, said Thursday that he supported the penny-per-pound tax.

"'I wouldn't call it a tax; I'd call it a fee," Crist said, explaining that "everybody has to pay taxes, but fees are attributed to the culprit."

"If Big Sugar is responsible for most of the pollution in the Everglades, then Big Sugar should be the one responsible to pay for it," Crist said.

In the Legislature, Crist was given to making heart-tugging speeches about the environment. But the Florida League of Conservation Voters, which rates lawmakers on environmental votes, ranked Crist 29th out of 40 senators in 1997.

Graham, who was governor from 1979 to 1987, helped begin the effort to save the Everglades, including overseeing the 1994 Everglades Forever Act, which requires sugar farmers to help pay to clean up pollution.

Hand, Graham's campaign spokesman, said Graham opposed the tax for two reasons: First, he has a "general reluctance to tinker with the state's Constitution," and second, "'he asked for but never received a convincing rationale of how that tax would fit into the overall effort to restore the Everglades."

Four years ago, Save Our Everglades endorsed Jeb Bush in the governor's race. This year, Barley is backing Buddy MacKay because MacKay supported the penny-per-pound tax.