On Wednesday, the Florida Supreme Court will hear oral arguments as it reviews a lower court's approval of the financing for the South Florida Water Management District's purchase of U.S. Sugar Corp. lands for Everglades restoration.

Last year, the lower court properly and thoughtfully ruled that the SFWMD met its legal requirements for issuing its financing, but special interests, mainly U.S. Sugar's longtime rival in the competitive sugar industry, appealed to the Florida Supreme Court.

Citizens following the U.S. Sugar acquisition have witnessed these special interests — and their lobbyists in Tallahassee — attempting to turn what is usually a routine legal review into a stage for distorting the facts surrounding the acquisition's purpose and terms. These opponents have tried to foster doubt about the public benefit from the lands and even personally disparaged those who champion the acquisition as part of Everglades restoration. It is ironic that the same thirst for profits that contributed to pollution of the Everglades is now obstructing restoration of the Everglades. Fortunately, none of these detractors, nor their well-publicized spin, will distract the court from its methodical legal review and, hopefully, will not fool the public that, for the large part, supports the purchase.

Simply put, the SFWMD will eventually have to buy more land for true restoration of the Everglades and its watersheds, whether it is from U.S. Sugar or another seller. The district is under increasing pressure from courts and federal regulators to add more storage and treatment areas beyond those originally contemplated in the state-federal Everglades restoration program.

Regrettably, the Herbert Hoover Dike surrounding Lake Okeechobee is in a weakened condition, preventing adequate water storage in the lake itself due to flood concerns. When a hurricane, tropical storm or even seasonal rain impacts South Florida, water must be released from the lake, mainly down its two estuaries to the ocean. There is no place to store it. These releases can cause tremendous damage to the environment, economies and quality of life along our coasts, and beyond.

Before the Everglades were drained to now only 40 percent of their original size, water overflowed the lake's southern rim, and the Everglades provided that storage. Indeed, if such land as U.S. Sugar's had been available when the current environmental restoration program was designed some 10 years ago, it would have been a showcase feature in lieu of certain existing components for providing storage and treatment.

The 73,000-acre acquisition under review is but the first phase of the 180,000-acre U.S. Sugar purchase to address these problems for South Florida. Water storage of this magnitude will significantly reduce freshwater releases into coastal estuaries and vastly improve water flow into the Everglades. Let's not forget that not only the environment but our water supply is at stake: South Florida, lacking mountains whose snowcaps melt into reservoirs, depends on rainwater flowing through the Everglades to recharge its underground aquifers.

How do we plan to use most of the initial 73,000 acres?
- 25,000 acres directly south of Lake Okeechobee for water storage and treatment.
- 20,000 acres for water treatment wetlands to improve water quality in an area south of the lake, where farm runoff pollution has been historically high.

- 10,000 acres to expand existing water treatment areas feeding the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge.

- 10,000 acres near Lake Hicpochee to store and treat water, improving water quality flowing into the Caloosahatchee Estuary.

- 3,500 acres to store and treat water, significantly reducing the harmful effects of back-pumping polluted agricultural runoff into Lake Okeechobee. To achieve these goals, a collaborative, public planning process is under way to identify specific projects for the acquisition lands, and there is no shortage of options. Stakeholders and citizens have been working with SFWMD engineers and scientists to evaluate all viable restoration proposals that an unprecedented 73,000 acres have to offer. It goes without saying that the first step is to buy them.