

# Friends *of the* Everglades

— Founded by Marjory Stoneman Douglas in 1969 —

March 31, 2026

Secretary Alexis A. Lambert  
Florida Department of Environmental Protection  
3900 Commonwealth Blvd, MS 49  
Tallahassee, FL 32399

Executive Director Drew Bartlett  
South Florida Water Management District  
3301 Gun Club Road  
West Palm Beach, FL 33406

## **Re: Failure to meet court-ordered phosphorus pollution limits for the Everglades**

Dear Secretary Lambert and Director Bartlett,

In contrast to the assertions of “great progress” presented in the 2026 South Florida Environmental Report (SFER), I’m writing to express Friends of the Everglades’ urgent concerns about the state’s impending failure to meet court-ordered phosphorus pollution limits in the Everglades.

Our new report, Everglades Water Quality and Stormwater Treatment Area Performance, relies on the state’s own data to illustrate a gaping divide between recent phosphorus pollution levels and the legally mandated Water Quality Based Effluent Limit (WQBEL) for water entering the Everglades. We implore you to embrace bold solutions as binding deadlines for compliance quickly approach.

Everglades restoration will not work unless the water is clean. The WQBEL mandates that the average flow-weighted mean total phosphorus concentration not exceed 19 parts per billion (ppb) in any water year for five Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs), which cover about 57,000 acres. Furthermore, the concentration must remain at or below 13 ppb in three of every five years. The state is falling short of these pollution limits, which are vital to survival of the Everglades. It’s a concerning fact obscured both in the recently published SFER and in other rosy public pronouncements. While Florida officials celebrate ribbon-cuttings for multibillion-dollar projects including the EAA Reservoir, the state’s data shows that, despite billions of dollars invested to clean the sugarcane industry’s pollution, court-ordered water-quality goals are not likely to be achieved.



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As documented in our report, none of the five Stormwater Treatment Areas (STAs) are currently on a trajectory to meet the WQBEL. Instead, total phosphorus concentrations rose, in some cases dramatically, from Water Year 2024 to Water Year 2025 in every STA. We note the stark contrast between this reality and the celebratory, even triumphal language promoting the 2026 SFER. The South Florida Water Management District's [SFER Highlights](#) document omits any reference to the state's failure to reach with the WQBEL — an affront to taxpayers who not only paid to produce the SFER, but who also have borne the immense cost of cleaning up the sugarcane industry's phosphorus pollution in the Everglades.

Two decades ago, Friends of the Everglades brought successful Clean Water Act litigation that mandated enforcement of these pollution limits — and we are compelled now to point out the state of Florida's duty to ensure they are reached. Our lawsuit prompted an \$880 million state investment to reduce phosphorus pollution emanating mostly from sugarcane fields south of Lake Okeechobee. The pollution deadline originally set for 2006 has been extended three times. Now, in 2026, the state is claiming a win for being 20 years late, while still not achieving phosphorus pollution targets.

Governor DeSantis' claims of unprecedented momentum for the Everglades are an extension of the rhetoric used in 2012 during former Governor Rick Scott's victory lap following the Restoration Strategies projects that resulted from our litigation.

We recall the moral clarity of our founder, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who refused to accept platitudes in place of restoration. In 1994, at age 104, she demanded her name be stripped from the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Everglades Forever Act because it allowed the sugar industry to evade responsibility for its degradation of the Everglades.

"I will not have my name on a bill that allows polluters to continue to poison the Everglades for another decade or more," Ms. Douglas told the Miami Herald in 1994. Her refusal was prophetic. In 2010, Judge Alan S. Gold rebuked the state for "glacial" delay and for creating "incomprehensible" rules that watered down pollution standards in the Everglades.

The 2026 SFER suggests that restoration is moving swiftly. This narrative ignores 30 years of legislative and regulatory deadline-shifting. Meanwhile, bedrock environmental laws are being excavated by special interests, and the sugar industry seeks to build a literal rock mine in the Everglades Agricultural Area.



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The state knows what it must do to fix the Everglades. The solution is clear and actionable: Florida must purchase more land for water storage and treatment in the Everglades Agricultural Area. Science tells us roughly 100,000 acres must be acquired to store and clean enough water in additional STAs and shallow reservoirs to meet pollution-reduction goals. Voter-approved land acquisition dollars exist via the Water and Land Legacy Amendment that 75% of Florida voters approved in 2014, yielding more than \$1 billion a year.

Time is running short. Development pressure is mounting as the sugar industry advances plans for its Southland rock mine and contemplates development elsewhere in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

We call on the DeSantis Administration to stop obscuring the dire realities in the Everglades and instead seize this moment to buy the land needed for Everglades restoration before the clock runs out.

Sincerely,

Eve Samples  
Executive Director  
Friends of the Everglades

cc:  
Adam Blalock, Deputy Secretary for Ecosystems Restoration, FDEP  
Chauncey Goss, Board Chairman, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Scott Wagner, Vice Chairman, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Ron Bergeron, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Benjamin Butler, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Thomas Hurley, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Carlos “Charlie” Martinez, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Charlette Roman, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Robert A. Spottswood Jr., Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board  
Jay Steinle, Member, South Florida Water Management District Governing Board



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