

sunshine state conservation

By Robyn Felix

As the state agency charged with managing west-central Florida's water resources, the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) has long viewed conservation as one of the key components to developing sustainable water supplies. While west-central Florida is known for its diverse water supplies, including groundwater, surface water and desalinated water, the district has actively developed successful conservation initiatives aimed at the public, public supply utilities and private industries. Many of these initiatives rely heavily on education and financial incentives.

West-central Florida programs promote water consciousness and savings



A SFWMD-sponsored extension office representative explains the water-saving benefits of an expanded plant bed to a condominium association manager.



District staff members inspect the irrigation system at a potential Florida Water Star home.

For more information about these and other SFWMD water conservation programs, visit www.watmatters.org/conservation.

Some of SFWMD's most successful conservation programs include:

Water CHAMP

The Water Conservation Hotel and Motel Program (Water CHAMP) began as a pilot program in 2002, and by 2006 it had expanded throughout the 16-county district. Water CHAMP encourages hotel guests to reuse their towels and linens during their stay to conserve water and reduce the amount of detergent wastewater. In-room and training materials help educate hotel management, staff and guests.

An audit of Water CHAMP showed that participants saved an average of 17 gal of water per occupied room per day. In 2010, a savings of more than 186 million gal of water, based on survey results and occupancy rates, was projected as a result of the program. A total of 451 properties, representing 68% of all hotel rooms within SFWMD, are currently participating in Water CHAMP. The district provides all program materials to the hotels and motels at no charge.

Water PRO

The Water Program for Restaurant Outreach (Water PRO) was developed in 2008 to reduce the typically high-volume water use of restaurants. Participating restaurants receive high-efficiency pre-rinse spray valves that alone can save up to 200 gal of water per day, a guide to water-saving best management practices (BMPs) and other educational materials.

The program is promoted with the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Assn., through partnerships with utility companies, by direct mail and through site visits to association members and independent restaurants. Currently, SFWMD has 280 participating Water PRO restaurants.

FARMS

Agriculture represents a significant water use throughout SFWMD. The district works with the agricultural community to address its unique water needs. Facilitating Agricultural Resource Management Systems (FARMS), a cost-share reimbursement program with the agricultural community, funds projects that promote tailwater recovery and/or surface water use while reducing groundwater withdrawals.

Through the FARMS program, the district expedites the implementation of production-scale agricultural BMPs to help agriculturists reduce groundwater use from the Upper Floridan aquifer, improve water quality and restore the area's water resources and ecology. By the year 2025, SFWMD projects the

agricultural industry can reduce groundwater use by 40 million gal per day (mgd) through these projects.

Community Education Grants

SFWMD's Community Education Grant program offers reimbursement up to \$5,000 to individuals, community groups, government agencies, nongovernment agencies and others to encourage public participation in water resources education projects. Projects can focus on water quality, watersheds, flood protection or water conservation. When people participate in water resources projects near their homes, they develop long-lasting involvement in environmental protection.

Cooperative Funding Initiative

The district actively uses its Cooperative Funding Initiative to provide financial incentives to water supply entities to use water efficiently. Funded projects typically reduce water use through incentives that change water-related habits or hardware, or through education about conservation measures. Cooperatively funded projects include plumbing retrofit rebates, water-saving irrigation technology rebates, landscape irrigation evaluations, community education and new water conserving technology research. Since the district's inception, it has awarded more than \$23 million toward cooperative funding assistance for water conservation projects.

Reclaimed Water

SFWMD's ultimate goal is to utilize 75% of the wastewater produced as reclaimed water and, of those quantities, have 75% offset potable-quality uses. Since 1987 and through 2010, the district has budgeted more than \$321 million in matching grants for 297 reclaimed water projects with more than 55 cooperators. This investment has leveraged projects that collectively will cost more than \$862 million to construct; when complete, it will result in 956 miles of reclaimed water pipeline, 221 mgd of reclaimed water supply and 1.15 billion gal of reclaimed water storage. These reclaimed water projects will provide an offset of 148 mgd of traditional water supplies that otherwise would have been used to meet demand.

Florida Water Star

Florida Water Star (FWS) is a voluntary certification program for builders and developers that encourages water efficiency in appliances, plumbing fixtures, irrigation and water recycling systems and landscapes. FWS is tailored to the needs of Florida's water resources and is easily integrated into other green certification programs (e.g., ENERGY STAR, the U.S.

Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program, the Florida Green Building Coalition's green standards and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's new WaterSense program).

SFWMD has certified 67 properties, ranging from affordable housing to million-dollar homes and commercial buildings. The program began in the St. Johns River Water Management District, with a goal of saving 20% of water used indoors and 40% of water used outdoors.

Florida-Friendly Landscaping

Florida-Friendly Landscaping (FFL) is a landscaping education program of the University of Florida. It is based on nine landscaping principles that when implemented help conserve water and protect the state's natural resources. In Florida, up to 50% of a household's water is used primarily on a landscape, and the average irrigation system consumes several thousand gallons of water during each irrigation event.

Over the past 10 years, SFWMD has established a cooperation with local counties to fund 13 FFL education positions at county extension offices. Annually, approximately 484,500 homeowners, youth, board members, residents and property managers of community/homeowners associations receive education on the nine FFL principles: Right Plant-Right Place, Water Efficiently, Fertilize Appropriately, Mulch, Attract Wildlife, Manage Yard Pests Responsibly, Recycle, Reduce Stormwater Runoff and Protect the Waterfront.

Youth Education

SFWMD's youth education program provides funding to a variety of water resources education programs for county school districts, private schools, home-school groups and nonformal educators. Program components consist of teacher

training workshops, grants for classroom projects, field trips, speaking engagements, online curriculum tools and publications for teachers and students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12. The importance of conserving water is embedded in the district's youth education activities. Student learning about water resources is measured through knowledge gains exhibited through pre- and post-assessments. Over the past five years, there has been an average increase of 31% in students' water resources learning.

Public Service Advertising

Each year, SFWMD promotes at least one public service advertising campaign. Most recently, it created a "Skip a Week" campaign encouraging residents to skip a week of irrigation during the winter. According to research by the University of Florida, grass does not need to be watered as often during cooler months. Staff produced five commercials, which were tested with focus groups comprised of area residents. A commercial featuring two neighbors, Tom and Stan, was the most well received and became the foundation of the campaign.

As a result of this campaign, district staff increased the public's awareness of the skip-a-week message by more than 450% based on post-surveys. Post-surveys also showed that 19% more residents skipped at least one week of irrigation when compared to pre-campaign surveys. According to internally conducted calculations, this resulted in a potential savings of more than 1.2 billion gal of water. **www**

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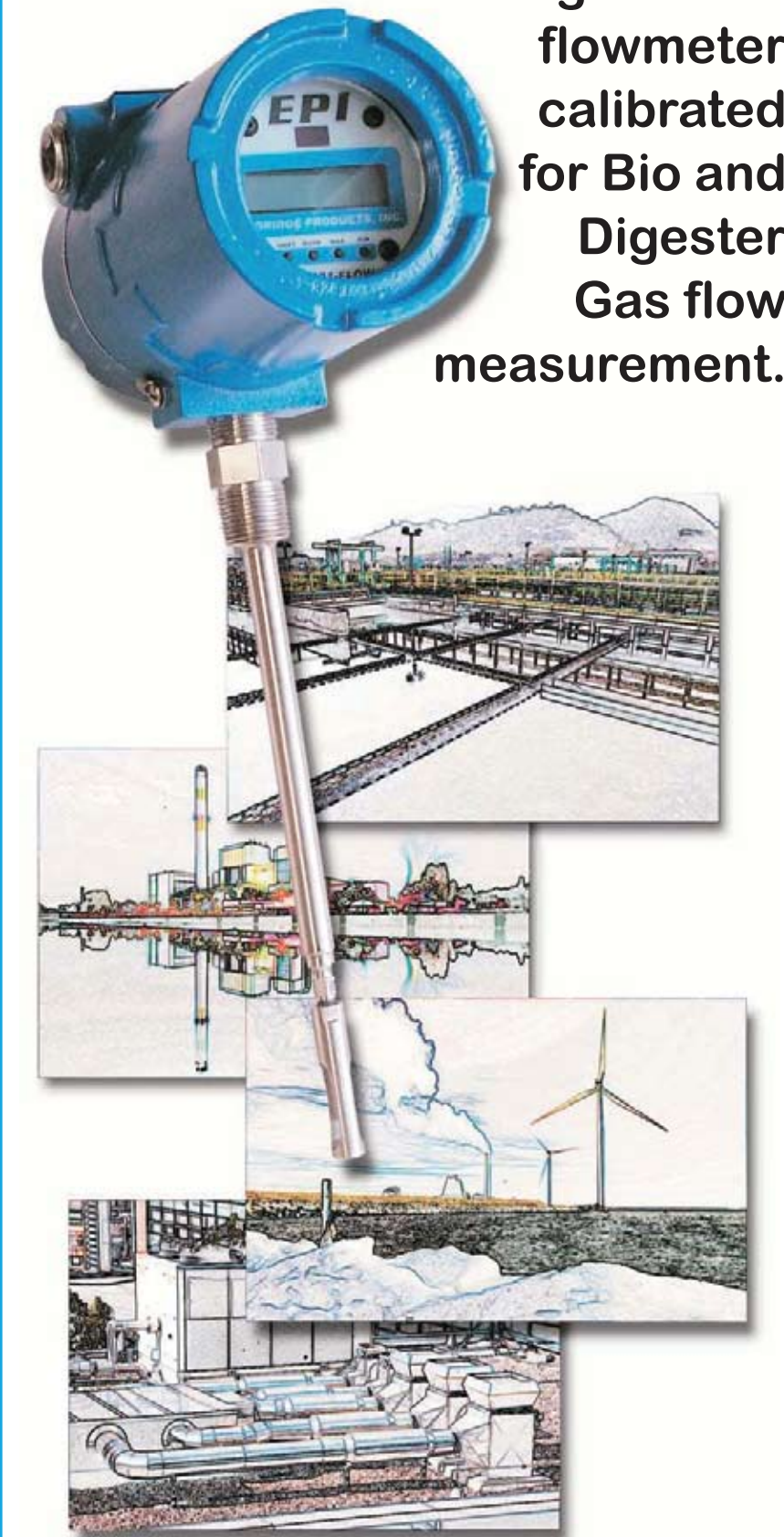
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