The Southwest Florida Management District's FARMS program aims to reduce groundwater withdrawals by promoting tailwater recovery and surface water use.

conservation in the sunshine state

Southwest Florida Water Management District focuses on developing sustainable water supplies

By Michele Sager

As the state agency charged with managing west-central Florida's water resources, the Southwest Florida Water Management District 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.

The following is a compilation of some of the district's current conservation programs.

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. The program 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 2012, a savings of more than 149 million gal of water, based on survey results and occupancy rates, was projected as a result of the program. A total of 350 properties, representing 49% of all hotels within the district with more than 50 rooms, are currently participating in Water CHAMP. The district provides all program materials to the hotels and motels at no charge.

The FARMS Program

Agriculture represents a significant portion water use throughout the district, and 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, the district projects that the agricultural industry could reduce groundwater use by 40 million gal per day (mgd) through these projects.

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

The district's ultimate goal is to use 75% of the wastewater it produces as reclaimed water and, of that quantity, to have 75% offset potable-quality uses. From 1987 to 2012, the district budgeted more than $363 million in matching grants for 323 reclaimed water projects, with more than 74

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The FFL program seeks to promote education about the area's natual resources. By encouraging application of nine landscape irrigation principles, the district hopes to teach citizens to conserve water.

cooperators. This investment has leveraged projects that collectively will cost more than $870 million to construct; when complete, it will result in 913 miles of reclaimed water pipeline, 234 mgd of reclaimed water supply and 1.1 billion gal of reclaimed water storage. These reclaimed water projects will provide an offset of 162 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., the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star and WaterSense programs, the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program and the Florida Green Building Coalition's green standards).

The district has certified 311 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 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.

During the past 10 years, the district has established a cooperation with local counties to fund 11 FFL education positions housed primarily at county extension offices. Last year, approximately 235,000 board members, residents and property managers of community/homeowners associations, as well as homeowners and youth, received education on the nine FFL principles: right plant-right place, water efficiently, fertilize appropriately, mulch, attract wildlife, manage yard pests responsibly, recycle, reduce storm water runoff and protect the waterfront.

Youth Education

The district's youth education program provides funding to a variety of water resources education programs for county school districts, homeschool groups and nonformal educators. Program components consist of teacher training workshops, grants for classroom projects, field trip programs, 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 in pre- and post-assessments. During the past five years, there has been an average increase of 31% in students' water resources learning.

Public Service Information Campaigns

The district promotes public service information campaigns using media outreach, social media and speaking engagements to spread conservation messages. Most recently, it promoted the "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.

For more information about the district's programs, visit www.watermatters.org. WWD

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