

Success of Cooperative Programs between University of Florida, IFAS Extension Agents and FDACS Staff

The University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS); in cooperation with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Office of Agricultural Water Policy (OAWP) and the state water management districts provided an In-Service Training (IST) session after the Florida State Horticultural Society in June of 2013. This IST initiated a change in direction for support of Best Management Practices (BMPs) by UF/IFAS, from one of implementation to cooperative education. The UF/IFAS BMP Programs has established ten Basin Area Teams (BATs) of extension agents that work with growers and ranchers in each of the state's 67 counties. Extension agents are restricted to the counties they work in or in a few surrounding counties in the case of multi-county agents. Therefore, the ten BATs follow county lines but contain from one to three basins that Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) have been established and that Basin Management Action Plans (BMAPs) have also been developed or are under development.

In-Service training sessions have been provided to extension agents within each of the ten BATs. These training sessions were a joint effort of UF/IFAS and FDACS/OAWP and introduced the extension agents to the local OAWP staff to foster interactions between the agents and staff. This interaction has lead to UF/IFAS agents extending BMP information to growers and meetings where FDACS/OAWP staff could present BMP implementation and cost share program information to the growers. Mini grants supported monetarily by FDACS/OAWP and administered by UF/IFAS BMP Programs have sponsored 11 demonstrations throughout Florida. These demonstrations include fertilizer practices, use of soil moisture sensors, irrigation wetting patterns, cattle range management, and ornamental plant production. Demonstrations of this type are conducted on commercial grower fields and end in a field day that growers from the region can see the results and have been found to be one of the best ways of providing information on production practices to the growers. The year-long activities will culminate with two ISTs on irrigation and nutrient management practices centered around the 4R Nutrient Stewardship concepts of Right Source, Right Rate, Right Time, and Right Place. The 4R concepts are not new to UF/IFAS extension agents, they have been taught by most of the agents to growers in the past, now the concepts will be integrated with nutrient management BMPs. The IST will lead to an expanded cooperative effort among UF/IFAS, FDACS, Farm Bureau, and Nature Conservancy to coordinate area and commodity based grower meetings to integrate the 4Rs into BMP education.

The efforts of UF/IFAS extension agents in the BATs have lead to many success stories of improved nutrient management. Sugarcane growers in south Florida are increasing the use of controlled release fertilizers with the potential of less nutrient application and reduced impact on water quality. A series of monthly BMP breakfast meetings held by extension agents and staff of FDACS, water management and NRCS in the Suwannee valley that have been held for many years have lead to improved grower meetings, field days and demonstrations. In Bradford County, the agent routinely performs sap testing and supply a fertilizer injection plan fro drip irrigated vegetable and strawberry based on their acreage each year. The growers follow the agents advice because it saves them money as well as ensures their crops are getting enough water and fertilizer. Soil tests from these farms well in advance of planting address liming and pre-plant fertilizer issues with in the BMPs. An on-farm workshop covering drip fertigation for small farms was held to educate other farmers. In Polk County, programs to cattle ranchers have successfully lead to more efficient use of herbicides and fertilizers, improved waste management, and reduced impact on water quality on approximately 16,227 acres. Ornamental plant growers have reported increased knowledge on effect of improved irrigation practices through use of electrical conductivity and pH meters on water quality.