

The Suwannee River Partnership receives an A+ on Report Card

By Darica Hewett Land

The agriculture industry within the Suwannee River District believes the Suwannee River Partnership has a responsible plan to protect the District's environmental future.

To reside and remain on the Partnership's distinguished list of members means farmers have chosen to change many traditional practices and have allocated a lot of time and capital to be better environmental stewards. Agricultural producers within the Suwannee River Basin have actively participated since the Partnership's inception in 1999 through the use of Best Management Practices (BMPs.) To date these BMPs are implemented in the District by 99% percent of poultry farmers, 90% of dairy farmers and 70% of crop farmers (which is the newest program on board with the Partnership.)

The leadership of the Partnership decided to conduct an extensive survey to ask participating farmers how they value the work of the Partnership and how it should work to protect the District's environmental future. Part of their responsibility through the plan is to provide a valuable service to its membership and to surrounding communities.

Agriculture Commissioner Charles Bronson sent farmers a letter urging them to complete the survey. They could choose to receive the survey via email, conduct the survey over the phone or make an appointment

to take the survey in person. It was very important to the Partnership to receive feedback from the farmers while making the process as easy and as personable as possible for every participant. Each farmer was asked more than 40 questions and dedicated approximately 30 minutes to provide their input.

The Results are In!

The Partnership eagerly waited for the evaluations to arrive. Among the list of highly valuable information received, the Partnership learned that farmers in the Basin:

- Would rather work with Partnership personnel to assist them with regulatory issues and value other farmers' opinions most when receiving production advice.
- Believe the Partnership is working in their best interest and feel they are receiving a valuable service.
- Believe that BMPs help solve environmental problems and feel that employing BMPs reduces the need for governmental regulation.
- Are positive about the Suwannee River Basin's environmental future and say the Partnership is living up to its promises.
- Feel the top four issues facing agriculture today are water, prices, land development and government regulations.
- Say the best things about the

Partnership are assistance and information, conservation of resources, cost-share assistance, cooperation with other agencies, equipment, technology and encouragement.

- Think the Partnership should do more to educate the public and get all citizens involved, keep paper work to a minimum and look for additional resources to maintain and increase participation.
- Believe the Partnership has a good and responsible plan to protect the Basin.

The Partnership believes in providing assistance to farmers and citizens to incorporate sound economic environmental practices in their workplace and at home. Leaders will gather and use the information obtained in the survey process to help guide the future of this organization. It is encouraging to learn they have the support and trust of the agricultural industry.

Survey responses revealed that the Partnership should work harder to educate citizens on ways to implement Best Management Practices suitable for homeowners and residents. Perhaps a good way to educate citizens is to use the success and leadership of agriculture as an example. For more information, contact Darica Hewett Land at hewettd@doacs.state.fl.us.