

Technical and Financial Assistance Available for Producers to Implement Agriculture Best Management Practices (BMPs) in Central Florida

Agricultural Best Management Practices

Producers have implemented Best Management Practices (BMPs) that maintain or improve water quality, quantity, and soil conditions on their farms for many years. For the purposes of the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services (FDACS) Office of Agricultural Water Policy (OAWP) BMP program, a BMP is defined by law as a means, a practice or combination of practices determined by the coordinating agencies, based on research, field-testing, and expert review, to be the most effective and practicable on-location means, including economic and technological considerations, for improving water quality in agricultural and urban discharges. BMPs for agricultural discharges must reflect a balance between water quality improvements and agricultural productivity (Section 373. 4595(2)(a), Florida Statutes). During the development of the BMP manuals, the technical and economic feasibility of a practice is considered. BMP enrollment and site visits provide opportunities for producers and FDACS-OAWP representatives to evaluate potential cost-share opportunities on the enrolled property.

Producers in an area with a Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) are required by the 2016 Water Bill to either enroll in the FDACS-OAWP BMP program and implement all applicable BMPs identified, or conduct water quality monitoring as prescribed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) at their own expense to demonstrate compliance with water quality standards. Multiple agencies in Central Florida recognize this and offer financial assistance to reduce the cost to the producers for implementation through cost-share programs. Multiple agencies in Central Florida recognize this and offer financial assistance to reduce the cost to the farmers for implementation through cost-share

programs. Farmers are encouraged to work with agency staff to determine which practices are feasible on their operation.

USDA – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS offers financial assistance for producers through three programs: EQIP (General Environmental Quality Incentives Program), CSP (Conservation Stewardship Program), and RCPP (Regional Conservation Partnership Program). NRCS staff work with producers to develop conservation plans to address natural resource concerns. These conservation practices, in most cases, are synonymous with BMPs. Depending on the producer's objectives, these plans can include erosion control and improving soil conditions, improved nutrient management and water quality, increased water-use efficiency, and improving wildlife habitat.

The conservation plan outlines practices to achieve specified goals, and NRCS provides technical and financial assistance to carry them out. For example, NRCS provides financial assistance for cover crops, no-till management, cattle exclusion fences along streams and alternative watering systems, including wells. Other funded BMPs include soil sampling, irrigation retrofits, cross-fencing for grazing management, waste storage facilities for dairies, forest stand improvement, increasing pollinators and improving bird habitat.

Financial assistance is provided through a payment rate established for each individual conservation practice. For example, per foot for fencing, per acre for cover crops and weed treatment, per item for a well, and more.

Contact your local NRCS office for more information on technical and financial assistance provided. Applications for assistance are accepted year-round.

Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)

SWFWMD offers FARMS (Facilitating Agricultural Resource Management Systems) and Mini-FARMS programs for producers located in the district: Citrus, DeSoto, Hardee, Hernando, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pasco, Pinellas, Sarasota and Sumter counties, as well as portions of Charlotte, Highlands, Lake, Levy, Marion and Polk counties.

The FARMS program encourages producers to engage in new or alternative BMPs to help decrease groundwater used for irrigation and promote water quality improvements. Some examples of BMPs that can be cost-shared are alternative water supply reservoir pump stations, water control structures, filtration systems, main-line piping to connect into the existing irrigation system, automated pump and valve control, soil moisture sensors, and fertigation systems. There is no cost share reimbursement cap of FARMS, however the total project cost needs to be proportional to the benefit derived from the implementation of the BMP. Reimbursement can amount to as much as 75 percent of total project costs with both water quality and groundwater conservation BMPs, or as much as 50 percent with water quality or groundwater conservation BMPs.

Mini-FARMS is a cost-share program that assists agricultural operations of 100 acres or less to conserve water and protect water quality within the district. The district will reimburse producers 75 percent of their project costs up to \$8,000 per project.

For more information, contact Carole Estes at (941) 377-3722 ext. 6570, or by email at Carole.Estes@WaterMatters.org

St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD)

SJRWMD offers cost-share programs for producers located in the district: Brevard, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Indian River, Nassau, Putnam, Seminole, St. Johns, and Volusia counties, as well as portions of Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Lake, Marion, Okeechobee, Orange, and Osceola counties.

The SJRWMD agricultural cost-share program is to engage producers in water conservation and runoff nutrient reduction. Past projects include irrigation conversions from less to more efficient systems, irrigation retrofits of existing systems, soil moisture sensors, weather stations, tailwater recovery and reuse, fertigation, and precision fertilizer application equipment, but other projects are welcome. Mobile Irrigation Lab audits are encouraged for irrigation proposals.

Cost-share will be up to 75%, not to exceed \$250,000 annually, for the engineering, design, construction, and implementation costs of an approved project. The applicant will be expected to cover maintenance costs; however, requests for items associated with long-term maintenance (such as drip tape or center pivot retrofits) may be considered for funding. The cost-share projects and items in SJRWMD and SWFWMD are similar. Some examples of projects include irrigation retrofits and tailwater recovery and reuse. Equipment may include items such as variable rate fertilizer spreaders, soil moisture sensors and irrigation controllers.

For more information, contact Suzanne Archer at (407) 215-1450, or by email at sarcher@sjrwmd.com

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Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Office of Agricultural Water Policy

Recommended BMPs are outlined by FDACS-OAWP in BMP manuals specific to agricultural commodities. Manuals are available for citrus, cow/calf, dairy, equine, nurseries, poultry, sod, specialty fruit and nut crops, vegetable and agronomic crops, and state imperiled wildlife. BMP Manuals can be downloaded from the FDACS-OAWP Agricultural Best Management Practices webpage.

FDACS-OAWP field staff work one-on-one with producers to develop a feasible BMP plan, identifying the BMPs that are applicable on their agricultural operation. Their funding is largely for cost-share of equipment purchases.

Cost-share funding falls under three broad BMP categories: nutrient management, irrigation management, and water resources protection. Examples of funded equipment for improved nutrient management include conservation tillage equipment, GPS guidance systems, variable rate applicators, and fertilizers banding machines for side dressing. To improve irrigation efficiency, they provide cost-share for soil moisture sensors, irrigation retrofits, nozzle packages, smart irrigation control panels, and more. BMPs for water resource protection include cattle exclusion fences and alternate water sources, like solar wells, among others.

FDACS funds up to 75% of the equipment cost, which they reimburse once the producer purchases the item. In most cases, the cost share reimbursement cap is \$50,000. Cost-share is distributed on a case-by-case basis. Producers must be enrolled in the BMP program to receive funds. Applications are accepted year-round.

Contact your local FDACS field office for information about the BMP program.

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