

Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation District

Fiscal Year 2025 Annual Report

Board of Supervisors

| Member | Seat |
|---------------------|------|
| Mariano Corona | 1 |
| Jared Figley | 2 |
| Donald Sellers, Jr. | 3 |
| Douglas Burnham | 4 |
| Glynn Rutledge | 5 |

Staff

| Employee | Position Title |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Audrey Kuipers | District Administrator |
| Vicki Wheeler | Program Specialist |
| Allyson Crawford | BMP Conservation Technician |
| Nancy Rivera | BMP Conservation Technician |

USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service

| Employee | Position Title |
|-----------------|---|
| Howard Harrison | District Conservationist August 2010 – November 2024 |
| Carlos Torres | District Conservationist December 2024 – Present |

The Creation of the Soil and Water Conservation Districts

As a result of devastation caused by the 1930's Dust Bowl, U.S. Congress declared soil and water conservation a national policy and priority. Over 3,000 local districts across the U.S. were established to address conservation concerns, serving as liaisons between the federal government and local landowners.

Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation District (OSWCD) was organized in 1951 under the provisions of the Florida Conservation Act of 1937 and amended by the Soil Conservation Act, F.S. Chapter 582 and is one of 49 districts established in Florida. Each of these districts are governed by a board of five, elected nonpartisan, unpaid supervisors,

who prioritize and aid in the implementation of services offered by our government to our local landowners.

The Mission of Conservation Districts

OSWCD is responsible for developing and carrying out locally led agricultural programs for the conservation, protection, and development of soil, water, and related plant and animal resources within the district boundaries.

Services

- Provide technical assistance with conservation planning and best management practice implementation through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Provide program enrollment, verification and financial assistance for state mandated programs through the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Office of Ag Water Policy
- Conservation education and agricultural program outreach

Goals and Objectives

The 2025-2029 Strategic Plan states the five goals to carry out their mission. Special District Compliance, Programming, Public Relations, Landowner Assistance, Funding Source, and Government Relations. They are met through the following activities listed in the Year in Review.

Year in Review

2.5 million in State Cost Share

Administered over 2.5 million in state BMP (Best Management Practice) cost share projects that will help reduce nutrient run-off to Lake Okeechobee and the NEEPA (Northern Everglades and Estuary Protection Area).

33 Landowner Agreements

Entered into 33 cost share agreements with the Florida Department of Agriculture Office of Agricultural Water Policy agricultural producers in the Northern Everglades Estuary Protection Area, totaling 345,000 acres enrolled.

1.65 Dollars In New Contracts

Assisted the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) with 16 new federal obligations of \$1.65 million encompassing 6,166 acres in Okeechobee and Glades Counties.

92,500 Acres Enrolled

Assisted with managing 100 existing Farm Bill Program contracts in Okeechobee and Glades Counties with \$11,257,900 in obligations covering 92,500 acres. Additionally, there are 28 federal conservation easements totaling 25,766 acres in Okeechobee County.

OUTREACH

Monofilament Recycling

Recycled 10 pounds of monofilament fishing line collected from local boat ramps and tackle shops.

Educator Grants

\$3,370 dollars awarded Educator grants to fund UF/IFAS Extension soil testing program that assisted 39 citizens with proper soil testing to help meet water quality compliance regulations and Okeechobee County Ag-Venture Inc. For reusable water bottles to promote water conservation.

Agri-Civic Center Nature Trail

Ongoing interpretive signage maintenance.

Feral Swine Management Cost Share Program

A grant from the National Association of Conservation Districts was secured to provide \$225K in financial assistance for landowners to install perimeter fence around sensitive areas and ag commodities to deter feral swine soil disturbance. Additionally, cost share requests for feral swine traps totaled \$5,650.45.

EDUCATION

Soils Trailer

Soils trailer reached 3,652 students. It was utilized by Hendry/Glades and Collier SWCDs Ag-Venture programs for agricultural demonstrations.

Discussed the importance of bees as pollinators and as a source of honey to students at Okeechobee Ag-Venture.

Envirothon

The soils trailer aided the Indian River Lagoon Envirothon (Environmental Olympics) with exposing students to soil and water interactions.

Poster Contest

Engaged students to think about natural resources and agriculture through local, regional, state, and national level opportunities through our annual poster contest.