

February 24 Meeting of the Union County Soil and Water Conservation District

Present:

Pete Cameron -- Deputy Chair, Secretary

Laurel Schaafsma -- Board Member

Buddy Finley -- Prospective Board Member Hugh Thomas -- Florida Dept. of Agriculture Representative

Scott Tucker -- Dept. of Agriculture representative Monica Jones -- NRCS Representative

The meeting opened with a short discussion of fracking, which is in the news lately. Members noted that recently the Union County Commission had made a resolution to support a state-wide ban on fracking. Discussion of the process of fracking, i.e, the high pressure pumping of water, sand and chemicals into oil-saturated rock to release the oil, raised the usual concerns about the safety of the process, and Laurel Schaafsma agreed to delve further into the issue and write a report for the month's IFAS newsletter.

The broader topic for the meeting was septic systems in Florida and their effects on our water. No one seemed surprised to learn that less than 1 % of the septic systems in Florida are regularly serviced. It would make some sense to regularly have septic tanks emptied because they become increasingly less efficient as they fill up (there is less space inside the tank for processing the waste). However, until the system fails, people are unwilling to pay the approximately \$250 to have their tank emptied. An attempt in the legislature to force regular servicing of tanks in the state (every five years) was voted in and then rescinded due to voter outcry about the expense.

If the drain field is functional and soil characteristics are right, septic systems remove 20 - 40% of the nitrates in household waste, and percolation down through the soil will clean the resulting fluid. There are, however, limitations to the success of septic systems due to physical factors in Florida. Percolation from the drain field may be too slow due to overly dense soils (clay) or too fast (too sandy). Salt water entering the drain field can clog the flow. A high water table can absorb polluted water from the drain field before it can percolate down and clean itself. Proximity to a water body (less than 150 feet) can lead to algal blooms in the water.

In the more densely populated areas, sewer systems are a definite improvement over septic systems; however, the connection fee (@\$10,000) can be an impediment. Using various types of financing, most people will connect to a sewer system when it is offered, however, there are some who will not -- even though state law mandates that property owners must connect to a sewer system within one year of receiving notice that it is/will be available. The problem is that there is no penalty for not connecting to the sewer and the law is not enforced. Local governments may adopt an ordinance to enforce their own laws, but enforcement is case -by-case and the lawsuits can be unpopular. In subdivisions of more than 100 lots, with public water supply, and no more than 4 lots per acre, septic systems are permitted provided there is a 50-ft setback from a waterway and the drain field is 2 feet above the water table at seasonal high.

Hugh Thomas pointed out several north Florida communities where a sewer system is being installed. Fanning Springs is putting in sewer and a wastewater treatment plant. The town of Suwannee is putting in sewer. The DEP is considering installing sewer in an area focused around Ginnie Springs where the department has a project closely monitoring water quality.

"Performance-based" septic systems remove as much as 95% of the nitrates from the wastewater and Wakulla has a requirement for these systems in all parcels of less than 5 acres that are within 300 feet of the spring. Hugh Thomas pointed out that these improved performance systems are not the boon that they seem since their aeration system represents a source of continuous noise and a monthly electrical bill.

The conclusion was reached that in most areas of Florida; developments have not been well planned in the management of wastewater. For example, Orange County has grown so fast that a septic system has been the practical choice for most homes. Now, with the Wikiva and Rock Springs polluted, the homeowners with septic systems contributing to the pollution are refusing to pay for a sewer system.

Monica Jones reiterated the 15 March deadline for those wishing to participate in the NRCS Conservation Stewardship Program, which she says is similar to the EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentive Program) but with larger projects. EQIP's Special Initiatives program (i.e. pollinator initiative, seasonal high tunnel) has a deadline of 20 March for those wishing to apply for government cost share.

Hugh Thomas, on behalf of the Suwanee River Water Management District, announced that there will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Brook Sink celebrating a program that has resulted in restoring flow of surface water into the 7-acre Brook sinkhole, from which it can recharge the aquifer.

On the subject of Amendment 1 money that will be available this year, Hugh pointed out that the state has purchased as much land as it can manage and needs to funnel money into conservation easements. In response to a question about easements, Hugh explained that easement land remains under private ownership, and the owner (and subsequent owners) can make a profit from the land but never allow it to be developed. One way to increase the number of easements is a program (Ranch Family Lands Program) for the state to pay a fair market price for land, which subsequently becomes an easement.

Scott Tucker announced that the CARES program will have its annual celebration at the IFAS farm in Live Oak on May 7. He mentioned that there may be a surprise nomination of a Union County individual for the CARES award.

The meeting closed at 8:15.