

## March 31 Meeting of the Union County Soil and Water Conservation District

Present:

Delbert Smith -- Chair

Pete Cameron -- Deputy Chair, Secretary

Duke Emerson -- Treasurer

Laurel Schaafsma -- Board Member. Feature Writer Buddy Finley -- Prospective Board Member (In process) Monica Jones -- NRCS Representative

The meeting opened on the subject of Amendment 1 and the fact that critics of the amendment are saying that Florida has already bought all the land it can manage (in fact, cannot currently manage all its land) and further purchases will decrease the amount of tax the state and counties receive and increase maintenance costs and thus be bad for the economy. This led to a discussion of the easement, which is an alternative to an outright purchase of land the state deems to be environmentally sensitive and worth preserving. Easement property owners are given a significant tax break, so the counties and state do get less tax money, but the land is now protected into perpetuity and the state's land management costs are considerably lower than if they bought the land and had to manage it.

Delbert Smith cited a large land easement deal recently conducted in Bradford County. The property in question, located near the Starke Walmart on 301, borders two lakes and hence could be considered to be quite desirable for development. An environmental study of the land was made, as well as a development impact study. These were presented to the WMD to show the environmental value of the land as well as its vulnerability to development. These factors led to a relatively high purchase price by the state.

Board members wanted to know what rules governed the landowners of easement property. A landowner might have 1000 acres with an easement on 250 of those acres. The 250 acres might be wetland or be near a body of water and thus be environmentally sensitive. While the landowner could still work the 250 acres, easement rules would prohibit the use of herbicides or pesticides on that land. Delbert was emphatic on the point that the landowner would not be able to do anything that would harm the land environmentally. He pointed out that DEP could, at any time, put in a monitoring well to test the water under the easement land. Rules also prohibit the erection of structures on the easement because they could have a negative environmental impact. Anything done by the easement landowner near a body of water must not degrade it.

Delbert brought up another example of an easement involving an orange grove owned by a relative of his. In this case, there were 6000 acres with a lake in the middle. The landowner was able to go on using the land as an orange grove, and if there was a problem with the land during the normal operation of the grove, such as erosion, the state would foot the bill.

Board members thought that they might have a useful role in promoting the cause of easements in Union County. Pete Cameron was tasked with calling the SRWMD's land purchasing lead, Jon Dinges, to see if he would come and talk to the board about all issues involved in state purchase of an easement.

Monica Jones pointed out that NRCS has a Wetlands Reserves program for US govt. purchase of wetlands as easements, wherein NRCS assumes maintenance responsibility of the easement. There is a compatible use agreement (owner does not degrade wetland) and subsurface rights are preserved by the landowner.

Monica also mentioned two state soil and water conservation district meetings that board members are free to attend: one April 22 in St. Augustine and another July 24 and 25 in Ocala.

Laurel Schaafsma asked Duke Emerson if the UC FFA was pursuing a WMD grant for improvements to its greenhouse. This enquiry led to a discussion of the greenhouse and the fact emerged that the greenhouse has gutters channeling its rainwater. Laurel asked if the school might want to use the rainwater coming off the roof to water the plants inside. Delbert said that if a large enough tanks could be used to catch the rainwater, it could either be raised on a platform to feed into the greenhouse by gravity or left on the ground with a small, inexpensive pump moving the rainwater inside. Laurel said that her husband could get 250 gallon tanks if this size could be feasibly used for this purpose. She and Duke were asked by the board to look into this.

Before the meeting closed, Delbert pointed out that the board's new member, Buddy Finley, being an expert in computer issues, would be of value in maintaining the system purchased by the board last year.

The meeting closed at 8:15.