



USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference

Wetland Enhancement Decision-Making Tools for Landowners and Technical Service Providers

Lake Okeechobee watershed landowners have not taken advantage of wetland enhancement cost-share and other incentive programs even at the risk of violating BMPs for phosphorus reduction. A local Wetlands Enhancement Sub-Committee comprised of landowners, government and non-government agency personnel was appointed to identify major obstacles preventing landowners from participating in these programs.

The sub-committee reported that landowners were confused with cost-share options presented by government and non-governmental entities. It recommended an "unbiased team" develop and implement educational programs for landowners and technical service providers about wetland enhancement cost-share programs. Four members of the University of Florida Extension and Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation District volunteered for the task and received a USDA-CSREES-CRIS grant to address these issues.

The program's major goal is to reduce phosphorus entering Lake Okeechobee through wetland creation, restoration and enhancement. Supporting objectives include: (1) landowners learn about various cost-share programs; (2) modify behaviors and attitudes about these programs; (3) number of landowners participating will increase as well as wetland surface acreage. The team developed 4 forms of unbiased decision-making tools including an interactive web-site <http://wer.ifas.ufl.edu/>, quarterly newsletter, table-top display, and a 3-fold brochure, a Wetland Resources BMP Pocket Record Book, and training opportunities to increase landowners' knowledge and trust in cost-share agreements.

In 2004-2005, information was presented in 20 venues reaching approximately 6,000 people. The newsletter distribution continues to increase with current mailings at 420. The e-copy newsletter is distributed to 80 individuals per quarter. In 2004, wetlands totaling 2,240 acres were restored in the greater Lake Okeechobee basin and 51 more are in process for 2005-2006. Quantifying ecological values of these restored wetlands regarding phosphorus reduction was delayed due to 4 hurricanes in 2004.

Author: Mitch Flinchum
Coauthor(s): Mark Clark