

Area 6 Association of Florida Conservation District's meeting hosted by HSWCD

Back in the 1930's, farming practices were different than they are today. The Dust Bowl, or the "dirty thirties," as it was nicknamed, was a time of severe ecological and agricultural damage to America's prairie lands. It was, for the most part, a man-made disaster caused by decades of deep plowing and farming without crop rotation. The result was that the land had no natural grasses to keep the soil in place and when a drought occurred during that time, the soil dried up and turned to dust. Winds kicked up and blew the dust east and south. Even though the disaster took place in the Great Plains, cities such as New York and Washington D.C. were affected with huge, black clouds blackening the sky. The Dust Bowl consisted of 100 million acres, centered on the panhandles of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, and Kansas.

Because the disaster was caused mainly by years of sustained drought and misuse of the land, it became obvious to politicians as well as farmers that soil conservation was a critical issue. As a result, Soil and Water Conservation Districts were created nationwide, generally one per county.

In Florida, there are 63 Soil and Water Conservation Districts. An organization called the Association of Florida Conservation Districts (AFCD) was put in place to assist Florida's conservation districts accomplish what they could not accomplish individually. AFCD is a nonprofit organization made up of an elected governing body. It provides information and support services to the conservation districts in the sunshine state. On May 28, 2008 the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District (HSWCD) had the privilege of hosting the annual Area 6 Association of Florida Conservation Districts (AFCD) meeting.

Highlands Independent Bank generously sponsored the event which was held at the Lake Placid Conference Center. Over sixty people from all over the state attended the meeting. Included on the guest list were Glades, Hendry, Highlands, Indian River, Martin, Okeechobee, Palm Beach, South Dade and St. Lucie Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Also the AFCD and Natural Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) staff was present and gave their annual updates.

The meeting started off with HSWCD's own Board Supervisor, Gregg Hartt welcoming our guests. Leroy Crockett from Resource Conservation and Development gave a presentation on Perennial Peanut and Michelle Thatcher, AFCD Executive Director, gave a talk on creative funding.

The new NRCS State Conservationist, Carlos Suarez was introduced. He shared that his goals include focusing on conservation planning for the producers and addressing the water quantity issues that we all face. He asked that the individual conservation districts address local issues in their areas. We are very excited to move forward under the new leadership and have hopes that, as a group, the conservation districts in Florida can resolve some of the challenges that are faced in today's times.

A Share Fair in the afternoon included HSWCD's Erin McCarta, Lakes Management Assistant's overview of the Lake Jackson Restoration Project and its funding. Scott Kuipers of Okeechobee Soil and Water spoke about Tropical Soda Apple beetles and their experimentation with pest management. Morgan Levy of South Dade Soil and Water shared information about the different types of composters and soil amendments available. Highlands Soil and Water had a composter and rain barrel display.

Okeechobee Soil and Water Conservation District's area speech contest winner, Justin Smiley, was given the opportunity to present his speech to the group. His mother and siblings were in attendance to support him. He will soon be competing in the state competition and we wish him well. Justin got to meet the new State Conservationist, Carlos Suarez, and was given some words of wisdom and encouragement from the attendees.

The meeting was a good chance for all of the Soil and Water Conservation Districts to get together, network and share ideas. With so much diversity and so many unique natural resources in Florida, it's always good to have the opportunity to glean new, creative ideas from our peers. The Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District staff is thankful to be a part of the AFCD. It is good to know that we have such great support.