

Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District's Conservation Connection; we'll do it again next year!

Approximately 200 people came out to meet the folks from the environmental agencies who participated in Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District's (HSWCD) first Conservation Connection Day on June 25th. Lots of information was exchanged; literature was given out and free goodies were received by those who came out to meet and greet their environmental public servants.

The agencies participating in the event included Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District, Okeechobee and South Dade Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Highlands County's Parks and Recreation, Extension, Master Gardeners, 4-H, Keep Highlands County Beautiful, Landfill, Recycling, the Highlands County Lakes Association, Southwest Florida Water Management District, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Florida Division of Forestry, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Ridge Rangers, Shaklee, Highlands County Citrus Association and Highlands Hammock State Park.

The citizens from Highlands County were able to have their questions answered and obtain information about what all the agencies do. Sometimes government can be confusing to people and one of the goals of holding this event is to make the whole governmental process easier to understand. We want our citizens to know where they need to go and who they need to contact when they have environmental questions and issues. We also had the chance to let them know what we do and what we're all about and where some of their tax dollars go.

People were delighted with the free hand outs and goodies that were offered. Everything from shower timers to rubber alligators were given away. Lots of free low flow shower heads from a Southwest Florida Water Management grant, were given away to homeowners along with free caladium bulbs from HSWCD. People walked away with free plants from the Master Gardeners, sink aerators, rain gauges, flower seeds and even authentic Lake Okeechobee muck from South Florida Water Management District and many other useful free items were given away. And, of course, the refreshments were a hit.

The participants were happy with the crowd, questions and opportunity to interact with the citizens of our beautiful county. They look forward to doing this again next year.

Feedback from attendees was positive and people seemed to appreciate the opportunity to find out more about what the different agencies do. Many of those that attended the event expressed their opinion that the event would be better if it was held in the cooler months and on a weekend. We, at HSWCD, are always looking for ways to improve our events and we are planning a much "bigger and better" event for next year. It is our hope that we can get enough agencies to participate on a Saturday and we are looking at late February or early March for possible dates. In addition, we plan to have the second Conservation Connection be a "kid friendly" event. We would like to have environmental type games with prizes; fun activities and lots of give a ways for children. We hope to find a sponsor who will help us out with a bounce house and other fun activities to keep the kids happy and busy, while educating them about the environment.

The staff at HSWCD would like to thank all of the agencies for coming out and helping us make the event the success that it was. Thanks to Highlands County Facilities Management for all the help with set up and take down. But mostly, thanks to our wonderful HSWCD Board of Supervisors for allowing us to have the event and supporting us when we come up with these ideas.

It is the hope of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District that people walked away with a better understanding of the precious natural resources in the area and certainly that they are more knowledgeable about which agencies to contact for their needs.