

## Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District hosts Lakes Symposium

Few places can boast such beauty and diversity as Highlands County. One of the things that make our county so unique is the 113 lakes. Covering about 48,000 acres and 190 miles of shoreline, our lakes range from deep to shallow, clear to brown and small to the 5<sup>th</sup> largest lake in Florida. Lakes are critical indicators of the health of our environment. Throughout our history, lakes have added to the quality of life for all that have lived, worked and played here.

It is vital that these beautiful natural resources are protected. In an effort to help Highlands County citizens understand some of the environmental, regulatory and recreational issues, the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District is hosting a Lakes Symposium on December 13<sup>th</sup> from 9:00 a.m. until 1:00 p.m. The symposium will be held at the Bert J. Harris Jr. Agricultural Center (formerly known as the Agri-Civic Center) in the O.S. "Sam" Polston Auditorium on George Boulevard in Sebring.

The educational and informative meeting will answer some of the most commonly asked questions about the lakes in Highlands County. Speakers from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Southwest Florida Water Management District and Highlands County's Lakes Management staff and Aquatic Plant Management staff will address the audience about current issues.

Booths will be set up from the different environmental agencies. Information and hand outs will be available. Subjects that will be covered include: wildlife, recreation, vegetation and habitat, water quality, general lake information, community involvement, tips for a clean lake and guidelines for lake front property owners and lake users. Refreshments will be served during breaks in the program.

It is the hope of the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District that many of the citizens of Highlands County will attend and find out more about protecting their lakes. All activities in the watersheds that surround the lakes impact the quality of water within the lakes. Therefore it is essential that people be educated about what steps can be taken to minimize the threat to these valuable, beautiful bodies of water.

Storm water runoff and fertilizers add nutrients to our lakes, causing algae blooms and excessive growth of aquatic plants. Simple steps that can be taken such as planting grass and landscape plants that are Florida friendly and require less fertilizer and water, not putting trash or chemicals in the storm drains and keeping vegetation around the lake's edge can all assist the process of keeping our lakes healthy.

Another huge problem we face is invasive, exotic vegetation in our lakes. Hydrilla can be taken from lake to lake if boaters and fishermen are not careful. Make sure when removing your boat from a lake that all plant matter is removed from the propeller, trailer and body of the boat before leaving the area. One tiny piece of hydrilla that escapes the eye of the boater can start another infestation if carried to another lake.

These are only a couple of the tips that will be provided at the seminar. We all have stock in our natural resources. This symposium is just one way you can learn more about our precious resources and take part in their protection. For more information on this event please call Erin McCarta, Lakes Management Assistant, at (863) 402-6545. We hope to see you there!