

Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District staff attends the SECDEA conference

The setting this year for the annual Southeast Conservation District Employees Association (SECDEA) was Pigeon Forge Tennessee. Jackie Bailey, Office Manager for HSWCD and new President of the Florida Conservation District Employees Association (FCDEA) attended the event along with Corine Burgess, Natural Resources Specialist and new Treasurer for FCDEA. Since being elected officers for Florida's association, the two wanted to take this wonderful opportunity to network with members from other states and learn more about what the organization is doing.

The SECDEA was formed on July 12, 1993. The association consists of nine states which include Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The District Employees of these states join together each year to share the knowledge and expertise of their successful activities with fellow employees. This creates a stronger and more professional team which enriches the conservation programs across the region.

Some of the many benefits of being a member of the SECDEA are professional training, free newsletters, networking, sharing ideas and recognition of outstanding employees. This year's conference included training sessions on grant writing and digital photography. In addition, District employees learned about new and exciting programs being implemented in other states.

One of the programs that was shared with the members was the AgrAbility Project. This project was created to assist people with disabilities employed in agriculture. The project links the Cooperative Extension Service at a land-grant university with a private nonprofit disability service organization to provide practical education and assistance that promotes independence in agricultural production and rural living. The AgrAbility Project assists people involved in production agriculture who work both on small and large operations.

The AgrAbility presenter, Joetta White, utilized volunteers from the group to come up and conduct exercises to show the audience how difficult simple tasks can be if one is disabled. Some of the exercises included putting a bolt, washer and nut together with socks placed on their hands and making a peanut butter sandwich with one hand tied behind their back. Another example included volunteers placing themselves in a wheelchair and trying to move from the device into a stationary chair. What these demonstrations illustrated was that people who have disabilities may have a difficult time performing simple tasks that we all take for granted. It was a good program and one that is assisting hundreds of people in various states.

The conference was also an opportunity for all of the state's presidents to let members know what they have accomplished in their area. Many good tips were provided to association members as well as sharing of great ideas. In addition, funds were raised for the association through a silent auction. All of the districts brought in items for the auction and over \$1,000 was raised this year. HSWCD donated a beautiful caladium plant provided from Bates Sons and Daughters Caladiums.

It was a great conference and both Jackie and Corine benefited greatly from attending. There were several members who specialize in education and some new and exciting ideas were obtained by the two. It will be wonderful to utilize these new, inventive ideas in our own Highlands County schools.

Even though it was very cold weather for Floridians, the fall colors were breathtaking and it was a most enjoyable trip. Pigeon Forge is located in the Smokey Mountains of Tennessee and the sites were magnificent. The conference got Jackie and Corine even more motivated and excited than usual to move forward with some new ideas and strive to be the best employees they can be for the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District.