

The Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project
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On October 29th staff from the Highlands Soil and Water Conservation District joined about 60 people from various agencies for a tour of 3 ranches with Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project (FRESP) water management projects. FRESP is a collaboration between 8 ranchers, environmental groups, state and federal agencies and researchers to design a program that will pay ranchers to provide documented environmental services of water retention and phosphorus load reduction in order to improve water delivery and quality to Lake Okeechobee and the coastal estuaries. This model project is designed to analyze the feasibility of paying ranchers to retain water on their land for the purpose of storage and or treatment.

Launched in October 2005 and supported with over \$6 million in funding, FRESP is in its third year of implementation..

The public will benefit when additional water management services are provided in the areas of regional water storage and water treatment facilities. And ranchers, who face low profit margins and fluctuations in the price of beef, will be provided with another source of income, creating a financial incentive for land to remain in ranching rather than be converted to more intensive agriculture and urban development – land uses that will further aggravate the water problems of the lake and increase habitat losses.

Some of the many benefits that FRESP will offer include:

- Providing as much as a third to half of the estimated 1 million acre feet of water retention needed north of the lake.
- Helping with water quality of the lake by capturing and holding phosphorus on the ranches.
- Providing ranchers who volunteer to participate and document the services they provide, with a specified source of income and contributing to the economic profitability of their ranch.

The 8 partners in the project are located in Glades, Highlands and Okeechobee counties. In addition the agencies involved are World Wildlife Fund, Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and researchers from the University of Florida and the MacArthur Agro-ecology Research Center.

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In the past 3 years, FRESP has accomplished the completed design and permitting of 8 ranch water management projects. These projects include rehydrating drained wetlands, raising the height of the water table in the ranch soil profile and drainage network, and pumping water from a nearby canal through existing ranch wetlands and flowing back into the canal. Monitoring

equipment has been installed at the ranches to field test different methods of measuring the environmental services that are being provided by the projects. And program design regarding prices for services, payment amounts, working with other agencies to reduce costs of program administration, have all been addressed through the pilot projects.

It is very encouraging to see all these different agencies and ranchers working toward a common goal. Holding and filtering our precious water on their ranches will benefit everyone. It would seem to be a win-win situation. The ranchers receive some much needed economic assistance; the citizens have the knowledge that more water is being cleaned and retained and the governmental agencies will get some much needed help in taking care of this precious natural resource.