

CARES awards three Highlands County Producers for environmentally friendly practices

The second annual recognition celebration of area farmers and ranchers for their commitment to Florida's environment was held on October 8th. At the event, which was held at the Okeechobee Agric-Civic Center, three producers from Highlands County were honored with the County Alliance for Environmental Stewardship (CARES) Award. These prestigious awards are given to producers who implement environmentally friendly best management practices (BMP's) on their farms and ranches. Among the 20 producers present, Highlands County's own Pines Ranch, Ray Parker Ranch and Karlson's Ranch were recognized.

The CARES program was initiated by the Florida Farm Bureau and the Suwannee River Partnership to highlight the efforts by producers to help improve the management of natural resources in the Suwannee River Basin. Since its implementation in 2001, the partnerships have grown and now include local, regional, state and federal agencies, research institutions, industry associations, businesses and conservation groups. The CARES program is now statewide and the farmers recognized at the Okeechobee event are those in the Northern Everglades area.

The CARES program was created to address environmental concerns and promote practical best management practices and conservation planning while recognizing farmers as stewards of the land. To be recognized for the CARES award, a producer must participate in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Service's (FDACS) Water Quality BMP Program. FDACS works with producers to provide conservation planning, engineering and cost share opportunities to implement BMP's. The implementation of these practices insures the producer is in compliance with state water quality standards. When producers have completed all BMP's they become eligible to receive a CARES award.

Farm owners who have met verifiable standards of excellence in resource management receive a CARES designation and earn the privilege of posting a sign on their properties identifying them as award winners for their good work. One of the keys to the success of the program involves site visits by public officials who assess the implementation of state-of-the-art resource management techniques at the farm property. Examples of BMP's include water conservation efforts, animal waste management and the strategic use of fertilizer.

Speakers at the October event included the Honorable Representative Denise Grimsley, Director of Florida Farm Bureau Federation's Agricultural Policy Division, Frankie Hall, South Florida Water Management's Benita Whalen, Area Conservationist for the Natural Resource Conservation Service, Jeff Schmidt, Secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Michael Sole, Pat Hogue who served as the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Services Extension Agent in Highlands and Okeechobee Counties and the distinguished Commissioner of Agriculture, Charles H. Bronson.

Pines Ranch, one of the recipients of the award, is a citrus operation that is owned and operated by Dr. Ricardo Pines and Mr. Eduardo Pines. They specialize in growing Hamlins, Valencias and Grapefruit. BMPs implemented in the grove are Nutrient Management and Irrigation Management. The entire parcel drains into a detention area that allows water to be reused, lessening the need for groundwater withdrawals.

Ray Parker Ranch was recognized for their cow/calf operation. Among the BMP's implemented on the ranch are Nutrient Management and watering systems for cattle.

Karlson's Ranch has registered Beefmasters along with a citrus operation. The Karlson's were recognized for the fencing they have installed to rotate their cattle and a series of troughs to provide their cattle with an alternative water source.

Successful farming depends on good management of the natural resources. Agricultural practices can be sustainable and environmentally compatible for farmers to continue to produce safe, affordable and abundant products. The CARES program recognizes the efforts of these hardworking folks who provide the labor and materials for our food, clothing and shelter. Each of the recipients of this prestigious award deserves our admiration and applause. These stewards of our natural resources are not only producing products that we depend on for our survival, but they are also utilizing techniques and practices that conserve and protect our land and water. Congratulations to the winners, you have our thanks and gratitude. Keep up the good work.