

Southwest Florida  
*Water Management District*

# 2025–2029 Strategic Plan





# Message from the Chair

The Southwest Florida Water Management District has been developing an annual Strategic Plan for more than three decades to provide clear direction for the District's mission and priorities by highlighting a plan of action over a five-year period to focus District resources.

Our mission of protecting water resources, minimizing flood risks, and ensuring the public's water needs are met, sets the framework for four core mission goals: Water Supply, Water Quality, Natural Systems and Flood Protection. To meet these goals, District programs and projects support 12 Strategic Initiatives.

One of our biggest challenges has been continuing to ensure that we have adequate water supplies to meet current and anticipated growth. Our Alternative Water Supplies Strategic Initiative focuses on partnering with regional entities to develop alternative water supply sources. As a result, the Governing Board has prioritized more than \$600 million in cooperative funding with the major regional water supply authorities in our region to develop alternative water supplies to meet the projected population growth. Another prioritization identified in the plan is potable reuse as a future supply source. The District has been investing in the advancement of this technology for several years through funding various projects and pilot studies.

Our region faced a new challenge in 2024 with three back-to-back hurricanes that brought record rainfall and historic flooding. The District is continuing to analyze the impacts from this unprecedented hurricane season and will be making recommendations that will likely impact our Flood Protection Strategic Initiatives in future Strategic Plans. While the Strategic Initiatives are implemented throughout the District, water resource needs can also vary by geographical location. Therefore, the



**Michelle Williamson**  
Chair

Strategic Plan also prioritizes water resource issues into four planning regions: Northern, Tampa Bay, Southern and Heartland. By dividing water resource needs by planning region, the top water resource priorities are identified and measurable objectives are defined.

For example, in our Northern Planning Region, one of the objectives is to improve our five first-magnitude springs by implementing projects identified in the Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) plans to improve water quality and natural systems.

To successfully achieve the Strategic Initiatives and Regional Priorities, the District must also excel in its nine Core Business Processes, which are also outlined in the Strategic Plan. As the District's Governing Board Chair, I believe the District's greatest asset and strength is its highly skilled and dedicated staff. The Core Business Processes highlight the tools, support and information staff need to make informed, science-based decisions and provide high-quality service to the residents of the District.

The Core Business Processes also highlight the importance of engagement, not only with our internal staff, but also with our stakeholders including residents, media and elected officials. The District also engages various water use sectors through its Advisory Committees, which include Public Supply, Agriculture and Green Industry, Environmental and Industrial and Commercial.

Despite rising costs for the goods and services we need to meet our mission, I'm also proud of how the District continues to live within its means by continually looking for ways to reduce costs, improve effectiveness and maximize taxpayer dollars. Staff have also been successful at securing additional federal and state funding to further reduce the cost of projects.

Utilizing a highly skilled workforce and science-based information, the Strategic Plan is our roadmap that defines who we are, what we do and how we do it. While we will continue to face many challenges with the ever-growing population and intensifying storm events, I know we have the right people, resources, partnerships and plan in place to be successful.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Williamson".

**Michelle Williamson**  
Governing Board Chair

Governing Board

The Governing Board establishes policies for the District. Board members are unpaid citizen volunteers appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Florida Senate.



Michelle  
Williamson  
Chair  
Hillsborough



John Mitten  
Vice Chair  
Hernando, Marion



Jack Bispham  
Secretary  
Manatee



Ashley Bell  
Barnett  
Treasurer  
Polk



Ed Armstrong  
Former Chair  
Pinellas



Kelly S. Rice  
Former Chair  
Citrus, Lake, Levy, Sumter



Joshua Gamblin  
DeSoto, Hardee,  
Highlands



John Hall  
Polk



James Holton  
Pinellas



Dustin Rowland  
Pasco



Robert Stern  
Hillsborough



Nancy Watkins  
Hillsborough, Pinellas

Table of Contents

Overview ..... 4-5

Strategic Initiatives ..... 6-9

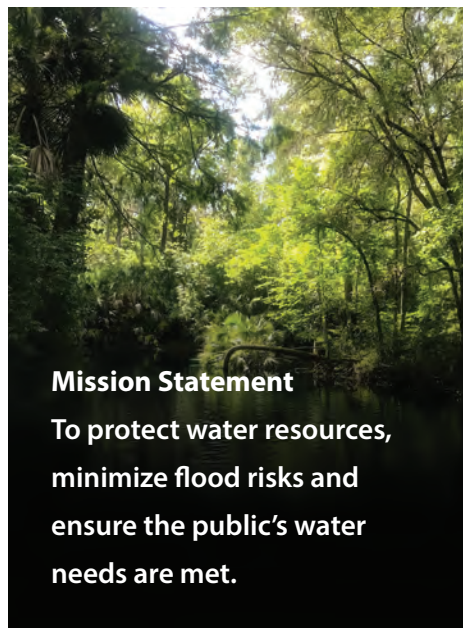
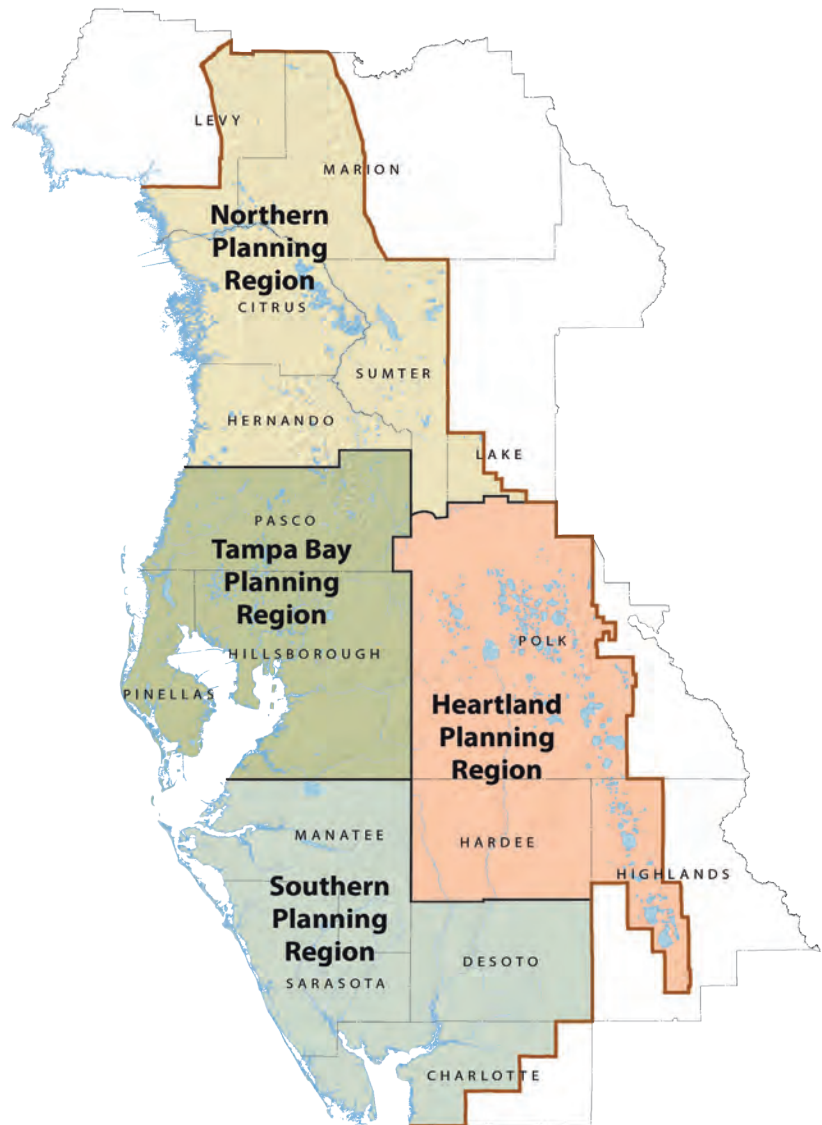
Regional Priorities and Objectives ..... 10-21

Core Business Processes ..... 22-23

# Overview

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (District) is a science-based organization responsible for managing and protecting water resources in west-central Florida. The District's job is to ensure there are adequate water supplies to meet the needs of current and future users while protecting and restoring water and related natural resources. (See Mission Statement.)

The District encompasses all or part of 16 counties, from Levy County in the north to Charlotte County in the south. It extends from the Gulf of Mexico east to the highlands of central Florida. The District contains 97 local governments spread over approximately 10,000 square miles, with an estimated 5.69 million permanent residents in 2022. This figure does not include seasonal residents and tourists. For planning purposes, the District is divided into four regions: Northern, Tampa Bay, Heartland and Southern. (See District Planning Regions map.)



## Mission Statement

To protect water resources, minimize flood risks and ensure the public's water needs are met.



## GOVERNING BOARD

A 13-member Governing Board establishes policies and sets the budget for the District. Appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate, Governing Board members are unpaid volunteers representing varied backgrounds and interests. Board members, who must live in the District, serve four-year terms.



## BUDGET

The District's primary funding source is ad valorem taxes, although revenues are also derived from state and federal appropriations, permit fees, interest earnings and other sources. The taxing capabilities of the District are established by the Legislature within the limits set by the Florida Constitution. The limit for the District is one mill, or one dollar per thousand dollars of assessed value. The Governing Board millage rate for fiscal year 2025 is 0.1909 mill. More information about budgeting is included in this document's Core Business Processes section.



## CORE MISSION

Florida Statutes, primarily Chapter 373, authorize the District to direct a range of initiatives, programs and actions. These responsibilities can be grouped under four general areas, which form the District's core mission: water supply, water quality, natural systems and flood protection. The District has established a goal for each of these areas of responsibility:



### Water Supply Goal:

Ensure an adequate supply of water to provide for all existing and future reasonable and beneficial uses while protecting and maintaining water resources and related natural systems.



### Water Quality Goal:

Protect and improve water quality to sustain the water resources, environment, economy and quality of life.



### Natural Systems Goal:

Preserve, protect and restore natural systems to support their natural hydrologic and ecological functions.



### Flood Protection Goal:

Minimize flood damage to protect people, property, infrastructure and investment.

## Strategic Initiatives

The District is implementing a wide array of programs and projects to meet these four goals. These activities are grouped under 12 Strategic Initiatives:

- Regional Water Supply Planning
- Alternative Water Supplies
- Reclaimed Water
- Water Conservation
- Water Quality Assessment and Planning
- Water Quality Maintenance and Improvement
- Minimum Flows and Minimum Water Levels (MFLs) Establishment and Monitoring
- Conservation and Restoration
- Floodplain Management
- Programs, Projects and Regulations
- Flood Protection Facilities
- Emergency Flood Response

## Regional Priorities

While the Strategic Initiatives identify activities implemented throughout the District, the water resource needs vary from one planning region to another. The top water resource priorities for each region, along with measurable objectives, are identified in the Regional Priorities section of this document.

## Core Business Processes

In addition to adhering to its adopted values, the District must excel in nine core business processes to successfully achieve its Strategic Initiatives:

- Water Resources Planning and Monitoring
- Innovative Projects
- Financial Sustainability
- Regulation
- Land Management
- Structure Operations
- Knowledge Management
- Engagement
- Cybersecurity

## Water Supply

### 1. Regional Water Supply Planning

*Goal Statement: Identify, communicate and promote consensus on the strategies and resources necessary to meet future reasonable and beneficial water supply needs.*

The District's regional water supply planning effort provides the framework for future water supply management decisions and is a statutory requirement where current water sources are not adequate to supply existing and future uses while sustaining natural resources (F.S., 373.709(1)). This is a collaborative, transparent effort involving local governments, utilities, the agricultural community, business representatives, environmental organizations and other stakeholders.

#### STRATEGIES

- Develop accurate and reliable demand projections
- Identify sufficient regional water supply sources to meet projected demands
- Encourage the development and use of regional water supply authorities to plan and coordinate water supply solutions
- Incorporate adaptive management processes in water supply planning
- Coordinate with other water management districts on water supply and regulation approaches
- Proactively coordinate with water supply utilities
- Demonstrate the District's financial commitment to assist in the development of regional water supply needs

### 2. Alternative Water Supplies

*Goal Statement: Increase development of alternative sources of water to ensure groundwater and surface water sustainability.*

Alternative water supply (AWS) refers to any nontraditional source of water that reduces the region's dependency on fresh groundwater. Since 1988, the District has helped to develop over 400 million gallons per day (mgd) of alternative water supplies, including reuse and water conservation benefits and new potable water sources.

#### STRATEGIES

- Develop alternative water supply sources that include surface water capture, desalination and brackish groundwater systems
- Continue to promote partnerships with agriculture through District programs such as the Facilitating Agricultural Resource Management Systems (FARMS) Program
- Partner with regional entities to provide alternative water supplies
- Continue to leverage District funds to facilitate the development of alternative water supplies
- Continue to support research and development of aquifer storage and recovery technology
- Promote conjunctive use of surface and groundwater resources through regulation and funding incentives



Reclaimed water pipe.

### 3. Reclaimed Water

*Goal Statement: Maximize beneficial use of reclaimed water to offset potable water supplies and restore water levels and natural systems.*

Reclaimed water is wastewater that has received at least secondary treatment and disinfection and is used for a beneficial purpose, such as irrigation, manufacturing processes or power generation. By offsetting demand for groundwater and surface water, this alternative water supply reduces stress on environmental systems, provides economic benefits by delaying costly water system expansions and reduces the need to discharge wastewater effluent to surface waters. More than 214 mgd of reclaimed water is being beneficially reused in the District, accounting for more than 16% of overall water use. In addition, the District's Governing Board

recently identified potable reuse as a priority for the District to achieve its goal of 75% reuse of available wastewater by 2040.

#### STRATEGIES

- Increase availability by increasing storage capacity
- Increase availability by promoting interconnects between reclaimed water utilities
- Maximize efficient and beneficial use of reclaimed water
- Improve efficiency through measures such as metering and volume-based pricing
- Continue to support reclaimed water research, monitoring and public education
- Partner with cooperators for the development of potable reuse projects, with priority for regional entities
- Promote the beneficial use of reclaimed water and the offset of traditional water supplies through the existing regulatory framework
- Promote the use of reclaimed water for aquifer recharge and environmental enhancement projects
- Promote active public engagement on potable reuse through outreach and education programs
- Continue to support and promote One Water Florida

### 4. Water Conservation

*Goal Statement: Enhance efficiencies in all water-use sectors to ensure beneficial use.*

Water conservation is achieved through education, financial incentives and various regulatory and non-regulatory programs. Per capita water usage in the District has regularly ranked as the lowest in the state.

#### STRATEGIES

- Promote water conservation through public engagement programs
- Support research and implementation of water conservation techniques and practices
- Promote water-conserving rate structures
- Utilize financial incentives to further encourage effective water conservation practices through the Water Incentives Supporting Efficiency (WISE) program and Florida Water Star
- Utilize regulatory programs to establish effective water conservation practices
- Continue to promote partnerships with agriculture through District programs such as the FARMS Program



# Strategic Initiatives

## Water Quality

### 1. Assessment and Planning

*Goal Statement: Collect and analyze data to determine local and regional water quality status and trends to support resource management decisions and restoration initiatives.*

Those who manage Florida's water resources must have access to accurate and timely information to support good management decisions. The District's water quality monitoring programs and networks help provide these data.

#### STRATEGIES

- Continue to develop and maintain long-term water quality monitoring networks to collect, analyze and distribute accurate water quality information
  - Coastal Groundwater Quality, Inland Water Quality and Water Use Permit Monitoring Networks
  - Springs and Aquifer Nutrient Monitoring Networks
  - Surface Water Quality Monitoring Networks
- Continue to support the District's internal data governance process
- Continue to promote partnerships through District water quality programs
- Assess the utilization of new technologies to improve accuracy and availability of water quality data

### 2. Maintenance and Improvement

*Goal Statement: Develop and implement programs, projects and regulations to maintain and improve water quality.*

The District develops and implements projects, programs and regulations to maintain and improve water quality consistent with the Governor's Executive Order 19-12, which instructs the water management districts to review budgets and prioritize available funding to focus on projects that will help address harmful algal blooms and maximize nutrient reductions. Examples of these efforts include partnerships for best management practices (BMPs) implementation such as the FARMS Program, focused on the agriculture community, and the Watershed Management Program (WMP), addressing watershed improvements; and the Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) and Springs initiatives programs that implement nutrient removal and other water quality improvement projects.



*District employee in the lab.*

The District also acquires and manages land for water resources conservation/protection purposes through its land resources program and regulates stormwater management through the Environmental Resource Permitting (ERP) process. Additionally, data and information are shared with counties, cities and the state for projects to improve water quality.

#### STRATEGIES

- Continue to support, review and track Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and Basin Management Action Plans (BMAP) processes for District priority water bodies
- Promote Florida-Friendly Landscaping™ principles and other behaviors that protect water quality

- Participate in the development and implementation of the statewide stormwater management criteria to enhance the District's ERP program
- Use regulatory programs to promote water quality protection and improvement
- Continue to promote partnerships through District water quality programs such as the SWIM and FARMS programs and the Quality of Water Improvement Program
- Support the implementation of prioritized septic and package plant retrofit projects within the Northern region to reduce nutrient concentrations in springs priority focus areas
- Support local government efforts to improve District priority water bodies



*FARMS Project: Bethel Farms Phase 3 Project (H777) (DeSoto County).*

## Natural Systems

### 1. Minimum Flows and Levels Establishment and Monitoring

*Goal Statement: Establish and monitor MFLs, and where necessary, develop and implement recovery/prevention strategies to recover water bodies and prevent significant harm.*

Minimum flows and levels (MFLs) identify the limit or water level at which further withdrawals would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area. Rivers, streams and springs require minimum flows, while minimum levels are set for lakes, wetlands and aquifers. MFLs are used for permitting or planning decisions concerning how much water may be safely withdrawn from or near a water body.

Through fiscal year 2023, the District has established MFLs for 207 water bodies. The District's process for establishing MFLs includes an annual update of water bodies prioritized for MFLs development, extensive data collection, analysis and reporting, public review, independent scientific peer review and rule adoption. The District routinely assesses potential water supply/resource concerns and evaluates water use permit applications to ensure violations of established MFLs do not occur. In addition, water bodies with established MFLs are monitored and assessed annually to determine the need for strategies to recover or prevent flows or levels from falling below established MFLs. All necessary recovery or prevention strategies are included in the District's Regional Water Supply Plan (RWSP).

As of 2023, 96% of the established MFLs were being met. To address water bodies where MFLs are not being achieved, the District is implementing recovery strategies for the lower Hillsborough River and the Southern Water Use Caution Area (SWUCA). In addition, the District has successfully implemented recovery strategies for the Northern Tampa Bay Water Use Caution Area (NTBWUCA) and lower Alafia River and determined the NTBWUCA and the Dover/Plant City Water Use Caution Area (DPCWUCA) recovery strategies are no longer necessary.

#### STRATEGIES

- Update the MFLs priority list and schedule annually
- Establish MFLs through:
  - Data collection
  - Data analysis and reporting
  - Independent scientific peer review and public review
  - Governing Board approval and rule adoption
- Continue to incorporate MFLs in District water use permit application review processes and compliance monitoring
- Monitor and report hydrologic conditions to support status assessments for water bodies with established MFLs
- Continue to review and refine scientific methods used for establishing MFLs
- Develop, adopt and implement MFLs recovery and prevention strategies
- Incorporate MFLs recovery and prevention strategies into the RWSP development process

### 2. Conservation, Restoration and Management

*Goal Statement: Restoration and management of natural ecosystems for the benefit of water and water-related resources.*

The Conservation and Restoration Strategic Initiative preserves, protects and restores natural systems to support natural hydrologic and ecologic functions. The major components of this initiative include land acquisition and management, ecosystem monitoring and restoration, education and regulation. To date, over 43,000 acres of habitat have been restored through District programs and partnerships with state and local governments.

Acquisition and management of land are critical to the District's conservation and restoration objectives. Once acquired, altered land is restored, if necessary, and managed to maintain ecological and hydrological functions. The District monitors its lands to ensure continued compliance with its mission and initiatives.

Restoration initiatives, such as the SWIM Program, are overseen by the District to restore natural systems associated with priority water bodies.

The District also regularly tracks land and water resource alterations through its aerial land use/land cover, wetland and seagrass mapping efforts. Through reviews such as local government plan amendments and large-

scale development proposals, Florida Coastal Management applications and related activities, staff can offer feedback to better link land and water resources. In addition, the District's ERP program helps protect water resources.

#### STRATEGIES

- Evaluate acquisition opportunities, while placing priority on water resource benefits
- Promote innovative restoration projects and partnerships
- Regulate to avoid impacts or minimize and mitigate unavoidable impacts
- Partner to continue wetland, lake and river monitoring and analysis
- Provide technical assistance to state, regional and local governments for linking land and water issues and concerns
- Apply adaptive land management strategies to maintain and enhance District conservation lands
- Effectively and efficiently manage District conservation lands with a focus of keeping natural systems intact and functioning, or enhance altered natural systems where appropriate



Great Blue Heron in the wetlands.



## Flood Protection

*Due to extreme weather August–October of 2024 associated with Hurricanes Debby, Helene and Milton, the District experienced flooding across all four planning regions; therefore, the District is prioritizing projects that will identify flood risk and minimize impacts from flooding as a regional priority in all of the four planning regions.*

### 1. Floodplain Management

*Goal Statement: Collect and analyze data to determine floodplain information, flood protection status and trends to support floodplain management decisions and initiatives.*

The WMP identifies, prioritizes and addresses flood-related water resource issues within a watershed. Information developed through the WMP is used by local governments, the District and state and federal governments in regulatory and advisory floodplain management programs.

#### STRATEGIES

- Implement the WMP
- Continue to promote partnerships at the local, state and federal level
- Increase public awareness of floodplains and flood risk
- Provide system-based data to support the operation of District flood control and water conservation structures
- Document water levels after flood events

### 2. Programs, Projects and Regulations

*Goal Statement: Develop and implement programs, projects and regulations to maintain and improve flood protection to minimize flood damage while preserving the water resource.*

The District's ERP program uses WMP information and regulations to protect floodplain and historic basin storage and ensure that new development does not increase flood levels or the rate of stormwater runoff onto neighboring properties.

Strategic property acquisition allows land to fulfill natural functions of storing and accommodating excess water and reduces the risk of flood damage by preserving floodplains.

The District's WMP identifies flood risk and efficient alternatives to reduce the risk of flood damages. The District encourages implementation of selected intermediate and regional system improvement projects to reduce flood risk and to maximize opportunities to provide water quality improvements. Implementation of local system improvements is primarily the responsibility of the local government.

#### STRATEGIES

- Implement the ERP program using WMP floodplain information to maintain current levels of flood protection
- Identify floodplain management and flood protection value associated with land acquisition opportunities
- Implement and maintain the asset management program for the District's 84 water control structures
- Operate and maintain District flood control and water conservation structures, canals, dams, levees and associated facilities
- Develop, implement and maintain an asset management program for District flood control and water conservation structures and associated facilities

### 3. Flood Protection Facilities

*Goal Statement: Operation, Maintenance and Capital Improvements of the District's dams, canals and water control structures to minimize flood damage while preserving the water resource and contributing to water supply.*

The District operates, maintains and performs capital improvements on three earthen dams, five major canal systems and 84 water control structures in support of the Flood Protection Strategic Initiative.

The District monitors the water resources and operates its water control structures 365 days a year. The maintenance of the dams, canals and water control structures is an ongoing effort and aligns with federal standards, where necessary. A Capital Improvement Plan has been completed for the District's water control structures. The District is implementing high-priority improvements identified in the District's risk-based plan. In FY2024, the District started construction on its first capital project resulting from the Plan at the Lake Tarpon Outfall Canal Structure 551 which included cement repair and addition of cathodic protection system at this coastal structure. Additional capital improvement projects are in design which include another cement repair and the addition of cathodic protection systems and the replacement of flood gates and their associated lift system based on the age and condition. These projects will further improve the preventative maintenance, life cycle management and capital improvement planning for the water control structures.

#### STRATEGIES

- Operate and maintain the District's 84 water control structures to maximize the flood protection benefits
- Monitor and maintain the District's dams and canals
- Implement and maintain the asset management program for the District's 84 water control structures
- Conduct long-term, risk-based capital planning
- Implement prudent capital projects to minimize the likelihood of failure of the District's water control structures

### 4. Emergency Flood Response

*Goal Statement: Provide effective and efficient assistance to state and local governments and the public to minimize flood damage during and after major storm events, including operation of District flood control and water conservation structures.*

Through its emergency flood response initiative, the District prepares for, responds to, recovers from and mitigates the impacts of critical flooding incidents. To ensure adequate preparation, the District has developed an emergency operations program and maintains a Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), which provides guidelines for pre-incident preparation, post-incident response and recovery, deployment and annual exercises. The District's Emergency Operations Center and emergency response staff are critical to incident response. All water management districts are members of the State Emergency Response Team and serve as support agencies to the state. The District also provides emergency assistance to local governments and the public. The District's Hydrologic Data Section provides data to internal and external customers to assist with situation assessments and decision making.

#### STRATEGIES

- Continue to promote an effective and efficient incident management system
- Train staff in National Incident Management System / Incident Command System structure
- Exercise the District's CEMP, high hazard structure Emergency Action Plans and Flood Event Guidelines
- Provide emergency assistance to the state, local governments and other agencies

# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Northern Planning Region - Springs

### PRIORITY:

Improve the Chassahowitzka River, Crystal River/Kings Bay, Homosassa River, Rainbow River, Weeki Wachee River and associated springs

### OBJECTIVES:

- Implement water quality and natural systems projects identified in the SWIM plans for the five first-magnitude spring systems
- Assist with septic to sewer conversions and package plant retrofits within the five first-magnitude springsheds
- Monitor status and trends associated with targets in each SWIM plan to assess the ecological condition of the spring systems
- Continue support of the Springs Coast Steering Committee (SCSC)
- Implement MFLs to protect spring flow through monitoring and reporting hydrologic conditions and through their consideration in water use permit reviews and water supply planning

### HIGHLIGHT:

The water resources in the District include more than 200 documented springs, and the rivers, bays and estuaries that are fed by them. The five largest spring groups within the District are concentrated in the Northern region along the Springs Coast. These five first-magnitude (flow rates of 100 cubic feet per second or greater) spring groups form the headwaters of the Chassahowitzka River, Crystal River/Kings Bay, Homosassa River, Rainbow River and Weeki Wachee River. All five systems are listed as a District SWIM priority water body and by the state as Outstanding Florida Waterways and Outstanding Florida Springs. In addition, the District has established MFLs to help protect each of these systems.

The Crystal River/Kings Bay, Homosassa, Chassahowitzka and Weeki Wachee rivers flow into a region of the Gulf of Mexico known as the Springs Coast. The estuaries and nearshore coastal waters of the Springs Coast contain over 500,000 mapped acres of seagrass habitats making it one of the largest expanses of seagrass in the world. Along with seagrass, the nearshore coastal waters of the Springs Coast include many species of attached algae, sponges, corals and hard bottom habitat supporting numerous ecologically and economically important species such as bay scallop, grouper, tarpon and manatee. The District's seagrass mapping program has been the single most relied upon metric for tracking the overall health

of our Springs Coast estuaries. Springs Coast seagrass mapping occurs every four years using a combination of aerial imagery and intensive field surveys.

The rivers, bays and springs of this region have experienced ecological changes caused by both natural and human impacts. Issues facing these coastal resources include sea-level rise, reduced water clarity and changes in the aquatic vegetation and nutrient enrichment. In addition, spring flow is highly dependent upon seasonal rainfall patterns. The District has established, and continues to evaluate, MFLs for its first-magnitude springs and other water bodies in the region to prevent significant harm that could occur as a result of water withdrawals.

In 2014, the District, together with local, regional and state partners, formed the SCSC. The committee's mission is to build consensus and partnerships to improve and manage each of the five first-magnitude spring systems through effective development and implementation of SWIM plans. All first-magnitude spring groups now have approved SWIM plans.

Each SWIM plan is a living document with adaptive management at its core. These plans identify management actions, projects that address the issues facing each system and specific quantifiable objectives and indicators to assess overall progress and help guide the SCSC. In the August 2017 workshop, the District's Governing Board prioritized combining District funds with state and local funds for projects that would convert septic systems to central sewer to benefit springs. The Board also identified the need to protect the District's investment by ensuring controls are in place to prevent



*Weeki Wachee River.*

additional pollution from new septic systems. In addition to these management plan development and implementation activities, the FARMS Program continues to work with agricultural producers to implement BMPs to reduce groundwater use and nutrient loading in springsheds.

Quantifiable objectives and indicators are established for each first-magnitude spring system. The SCSC provided support and input on updates to the quantifiable objectives and including indicators. These updates were approved by the Governing Board on June 25, 2024.

### Chassahowitzka River Spring Group

- Water clarity
- Nitrate concentration
- Minimum flows
- Coverage of desirable submerged aquatic vegetation
- Coverage of invasive aquatic vegetation

### Crystal River/Kings Bay Spring Group

- Water clarity
- Nitrate concentration
- Phosphorus concentration
- Chlorophyll concentration
- Minimum flows
- Coverage of desirable submerged aquatic vegetation
- Coverage of invasive aquatic vegetation
- No net loss of shoreline in natural condition
- Enhancement of disturbed shoreline

### Homosassa River Spring Group

- Water clarity
- Nitrate concentration
- Minimum flows
- Coverage of desirable benthic habitat
- Coverage of invasive aquatic vegetation
- No net loss of shoreline in natural condition

### Rainbow River Spring Group

- Water clarity
- Nitrate concentration
- Minimum flows
- Coverage of desirable submerged aquatic vegetation
- Coverage of invasive aquatic vegetation

### Weeki Wachee River Spring Group

- Water clarity
- Nitrate concentration
- Minimum flows
- Coverage of desirable submerged aquatic vegetation
- Coverage of invasive aquatic vegetation



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Northern Planning Region – Water Supply

### PRIORITY:

Ensure long-term sustainable water supply

### OBJECTIVES:

- Increase water conservation
  - Achieve and maintain 150-gallon daily compliance per capita with all public supply utilities
  - Achieve and maintain average unadjusted gross per capita water use of 148 gallons per capita per day (gpcd) by 2025
    - This represents a 5.4% savings of 4.35 mgd from the 2011-2015 average
  - Achieve 75% utilization of all wastewater flows and a 75% resource benefit by 2040 and assist in the implementation of potable reuse
    - As of 2023, the Northern region had 25.6 mgd of wastewater flow and 17.5 mgd of reuse for a utilization rate of approximately 68%
- Increase the use of reclaimed water for potable, recharge and environmental enhancement projects
- Continue to partner with the Withlacoochee Regional Water Supply Authority to promote regional water supply planning and development

### HIGHLIGHT:

The District's most recent RWSP was completed in 2020 with the next five-year update currently underway. The 2025 RWSP will assess water demands, as well as sources and projects to meet those demands, for the Northern Planning Region through 2045. Completion of the 2025 RWSP is scheduled for late 2025.

Public supply use, which accounts for about 50% of the water use in the Northern region, has significant potential for water savings. In 2023, there were seven utilities in the Northern region with compliance per capita figures higher than 150 gpcd. The District's goals are to ensure that all utilities fall below the maximum compliance per capita usage and to further reduce the regional average per capita in accordance with the RWSP. The District's plan to assist public supply utilities is to minimize the need for additional groundwater supplies by maximizing the use of available reclaimed water and implementing comprehensive water conservation measures and best management practices.

The District promotes regional approaches to water supply planning and development. The benefits of regional systems include economies of scale, better ability to manage environmental impacts, improved system reliability, operational flexibility and emergency backup capability. Larger regional systems are also able to take advantage of conjunctive use, wherein both groundwater and alternative sources are available and can be managed to mimic natural hydrologic cycles.

In the Northern region, the District is partnering with the Withlacoochee Regional Water Supply Authority to promote regional water supply planning and development. This most recently includes cooperatively funding regional water conservation efforts and an update to the Authority's Master Water Supply Plan.



*Reclaimed water facility.*

# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Tampa Bay Planning Region – Lower Hillsborough River MFLs Recovery and MFL Monitoring

### PRIORITY:

Implement the lower Hillsborough River MFLs Recovery Strategy and monitor other MFLs

### OBJECTIVES:

#### ■ Northern Tampa Bay Water Use Caution Area

- Complete annual assessments and the third required five-year evaluation of results achieved from implementation of the MFLs recovery strategy adopted for the lower Hillsborough River
- Achieve 75% utilization of all wastewater flows and a 75% resource benefit by 2040 and assist in the implementation of potable reuse
  - As of 2023, the Tampa Bay Region had 235.8 mgd of wastewater flow and 125.7 mgd of reuse for a utilization rate of approximately 53%
- Increase the use of reclaimed water for potable, recharge and environmental enhancement

- Achieve and maintain a reduction in 2011-2015 regional average unadjusted gross per capita (94 gpcd) water use by 5.3% to 89 gpcd by 2025. This represents savings of 16.25 mgd
- Assist Tampa Bay Water in the development of 20 mgd of alternative supply sources and 11 mgd of water conservation savings
- Maintain regulatory programs associated with the NTBWUCA
- Continue to monitor the environmental conditions through annual assessments of established MFLs

#### ■ Dover/Plant City Water Use Caution Area

- Maintain achievement of the DPCWUCA area minimum aquifer level for the upper Floridan aquifer by continuing to implement cold protection permitting procedures, assess their status annually and promote FARMS projects that reduce cold protection groundwater uses

- Continue to monitor the aquifer system through annual assessment of the established DPCWUCA minimum aquifer level

#### ■ Southern Water Use Caution Area

- Achieve 40 mgd offset in groundwater withdrawals in the SWUCA by 2025
- Achieve the SWUCA saltwater intrusion minimum aquifer level (SWIMAL) for the upper Floridan aquifer to slow the rate of saltwater intrusion in the Most Impacted Area (MIA)
- Ensure that there are sufficient water supplies for all existing and projected reasonable-beneficial uses
- Continue to monitor recovery of environmental conditions in the SWUCA through annual assessments of MFLs and five-year recovery status reviews

### HIGHLIGHT:

The District sets MFLs on priority water bodies. An MFL is the limit or water level at which further withdrawals would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area. If the existing flow or level of a water body is below or is projected to fall below an applicable minimum flow or level within 20 years, a recovery or prevention strategy must be implemented.

Additionally, the District can designate a water use caution area (WUCA) when the Governing Board determines that regional action is necessary to address cumulative water withdrawals which are causing or may cause adverse impacts to the water and related natural resources or the public interest. WUCA rules enhance the protection and recovery of the water resources. Three WUCAs, the NTBWUCA, DPCWUCA and SWUCA, have been identified for portions of the Tampa Bay Planning Region.

The **NTBWUCA**, which encompasses all of Pinellas and Pasco counties, and those portions of Hillsborough County north of Highway 60, was established to address adverse impacts caused by ground and surface water withdrawals. The first phase of the District's recovery strategy for restoring water resources within the NTBWUCA called for reduced pumping from Tampa Bay Water's regional wellfields and providing financial incentives

for construction of alternative water supply projects. To date, these efforts have produced more than 140 mgd of new alternative water sources and allowed for groundwater withdrawals to be reduced by more than 60 mgd. In addition, Tampa Bay Water has formed a regional water conservation program called Tampa Bay Water Wise. This program offers a variety of incentives for water conservation Best Management Practices (BMPs) with the long-term goal of conserving 11 mgd.

In 2010, the District determined that more information was needed to fully evaluate the effects of the reductions on MFLs recovery and initiated a second phase of the NTBWUCA recovery strategy through adoption of a comprehensive plan that would sunset in 2020. The plan included continued monitoring and evaluation of environmental mitigation for withdrawal impacts and continued water conservation activities by Tampa Bay Water's member governments.

Comprehensive recovery assessments completed by Tampa





# Regional Priorities and Objectives

Bay Water and the District in 2020, as well as MFL status assessments completed by the District in 2020 and 2021, identified substantial recovery of hydrologic and ecologic conditions associated with strategy implementation and rainfall conditions. Collectively these evaluations indicated that as of 2021, 120 of the 121 established MFLs in the NTBWUCA were being achieved, with the exception being MFLs established for the lower Hillsborough River. Based on these findings, the District's Governing Board repealed the comprehensive recovery plan for the NTBWUCA in 2021 and adopted the Hillsborough River Recovery Strategy for continued implementation. Corrective operational protocols for achieving minimum flows in the river have been identified and are being implemented to ensure future compliance. The recovery strategy for the lower Hillsborough River addresses the augmentation of the river with water from a variety of sources, including Sulphur Springs, Blue Sink, the Tampa Bypass Canal and Morris Bridge Sink. An update on the status of the Hillsborough River Recovery Strategy is provided to the Governing Board annually. In addition, two comprehensive five-year recovery assessments have been completed and a third and final five-year assessment will be completed in 2025.

The **DPCWUCA** extends over an approximate 260-square-mile area in northeast Hillsborough County and eastern Polk County and overlaps with portions of the NTBWUCA and the SWUCA. The DPCWUCA was established in 2011 to address impacts from groundwater pumping for cold protection. To protect crops from freeze events, common management practice for many farmers with agricultural commodities, including strawberries, blueberries, citrus and nurseries, involves pumping groundwater for cold protection when air temperatures drop to near freezing. Substantial groundwater use during these times lowers groundwater levels and can impact residential wells and contribute to sinkhole development. During a historic 11-day freeze event in January 2010, numerous residential wells in the Dover/Plant City area were impacted, and sinkholes were reported. As a result, the District developed and adopted a minimum aquifer level and recovery strategy for the DPCWUCA in 2011 to significantly reduce and monitor groundwater pumping during future freeze events that may cause impacts to existing legal users.

The objectives of the DPCWUCA Recovery Strategy were, by 2020, to have reduced groundwater pumped for cold protection by

20% relative to that pumped during the 2010 weather event and to achieve the minimum aquifer level. Recovery mechanisms identified in the strategy include non-regulatory and regulatory approaches. Non-regulatory mechanisms associated with the strategy include cost-share assistance through the FARMS Program to incentivize the implementation of BMPs to offset groundwater withdrawals for cold protection. The strategy's regulatory measures addressed groundwater withdrawal impacts, alternative water supplies, frost/freeze protection methods and resource recovery. These rules along with the non-regulatory mechanisms were intended to promote continued recovery of the minimum aquifer level.

An assessment completed in 2020 indicated the 2010 weather event that precipitated adoption of the DPCWUCA minimum aquifer level and recovery strategy may be expected about once every 570 years. In addition, use of updated modeling and evaluation of declining historic and projected agricultural land use and water use indicated the minimum aquifer level was being achieved and the recovery strategy was not needed. Based on these findings, the District repealed the DPCWUCA recovery strategy in 2022, continues to implement the DPCWUCA rules and associated projects and will annually assess the status of the currently-met minimum aquifer level.

The **SWUCA** extends over 5,100 square miles in eight District counties and includes the southern portion of Hillsborough County within the Tampa Bay Planning Region. Depressed aquifer levels in the SWUCA have resulted in saltwater intrusion along the coast, contributed to reduced flows in the upper Peace River and lowered lake levels in areas of Polk and Highlands counties. Groundwater withdrawals have been identified as the primary cause of the depressed aquifer levels throughout the groundwater basin, with drawdowns in some areas exceeding 50 feet.

The District adopted the SWUCA Recovery Strategy in 2006 to recover MFLs that were concurrently established with the strategy. The major goals for the recovery strategy are reducing the rate of saltwater intrusion in the MIA, restoring minimum flows in the upper Peace River and restoring minimum levels within the lakes in the Ridge area, which extends roughly 90 miles along the center of the state in Polk and Highlands counties. A status assessment completed in 2023 indicated that, for the first time, the SWUCA SWIMAL was being met. Through fiscal year 2024, the District has

adopted MFLs for 50 priority water bodies in the SWUCA and approximately 86% of these MFLs are being met.

Within the Tampa Bay Planning Region, the District is helping to fund the Hillsborough County South Hillsborough Aquifer Recharge Project (SHARP). This project's goal is to expand the use of reclaimed water to recharge non-potable portions of the upper Floridan aquifer to improve aquifer water levels in the MIA of the SWUCA and to slow the rate of saltwater intrusion.

---

## Primary elements of the SWUCA Recovery Strategy for this region include:

- Updating the RWSP to identify how to address increasing water needs while minimizing impacts to the water resources and related natural systems
    - The District approved a plan update in 2020, with the next update underway and scheduled for completion in 2025
  - Providing financial incentives for water conservation, creation of alternative supplies and regional interconnections
  - Monitoring and reporting
- 



*Hillsborough River.*

# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Tampa Bay Planning Region – Improve Water Bodies

### PRIORITY:

Improve Tampa Bay and lakes Seminole, Tarpon and Thonotosassa

### OBJECTIVES:

- Develop and implement natural system projects that restore critical shoreline, coastal uplands and intertidal systems and freshwater wetlands
- Develop and implement water quality projects to reduce nutrient loading
- Update the Lake Tarpon and Lake Thonotosassa SWIM plans

### HIGHLIGHT:

**Tampa Bay** is designated as an “Estuary of National Significance” and a District SWIM priority water body. The 400-square-mile bay is Florida’s largest open-water estuary. Its 2,200-square-mile watershed contains more than two million residents.

Three main challenges exist in the Tampa Bay watershed. Coastal uplands and wetlands have been altered and lost. Nonnative animal and plant species have spread, and water quality has been degraded from pollutants and nutrient loading.

The District completed the update of the Tampa Bay SWIM Plan and was approved by the Governing Board on Oct. 24, 2023. The District worked closely with the Tampa Bay Estuary Program (TBEP), local governments and other stakeholders to complete this latest update. The Tampa Bay SWIM Plan draws heavily on the TBEP Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP), the Tampa Bay Nitrogen Management Consortium Reasonable Assurance Plan and other relevant documents. The Tampa Bay SWIM Plan does not duplicate the TBEP’s CCMP, rather it uses the CCMP as a reference to identify those elements that align with SWIM’s core missions of water quality, hydrologic restoration and natural systems.

For more than 30 years, the District’s seagrass mapping program has been the most relied upon metric for tracking the overall health of our estuaries. In Tampa Bay, seagrass habitat is mapped every two years using a combination of aerial imagery and intensive field surveys. From 1988 to 2016, seagrass habitat expanded throughout Tampa Bay, reaching a record 41,655 mapped acres in 2016. The TBEP established

a recovery goal of 40,000 acres of seagrass habitat. This target is based on seagrass acreage estimates from 1950s aerial photography and identified in the Habitat Master Plan (2020 Update). In 2014, the District mapped 40,295 acres of seagrass in Tampa Bay, exceeding TBEP’s target for the first time since mapping began in 1988. In 2016 and again in 2018, total seagrass acreage in Tampa Bay exceeded 40,000 mapped acres. In 2020 and 2022, however, the bay experienced back-to-back seagrass losses with 34,297 and 30,137 mapped acres, respectively. The next seagrass mapping results based on imagery acquired over the winter of 2023-2024 will be released in early 2025.

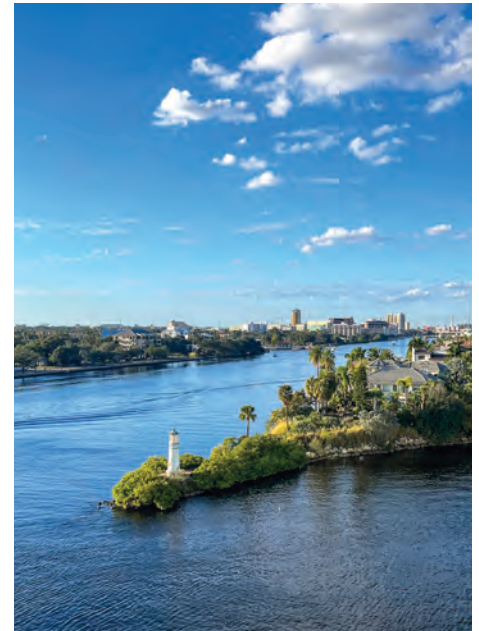
Habitat restoration continues to be a focus in Tampa Bay and the District’s SWIM Program together with many cooperators and partners have restored over 7,300 acres of coastal habitat. Additionally, the District is committed to improving water quality completing projects that have treated more than 132 square miles of contributing Tampa Bay watershed.

**Lake Seminole** is a 684-acre freshwater lake in west-central Pinellas County that was created in the 1940s by the impoundment of an arm of Long Bayou, a brackish water segment of Boca Ciega Bay. The lake’s watershed encompasses approximately 3,500 acres, of which almost 90% is developed. Water quality concerns in Lake Seminole began in the 1960s, as urbanization of the watershed increased and worsened in the 1980s and 90s.

In 2004, Pinellas County adopted the Lake Seminole Watershed Management Plan to identify and implement projects to reduce



*Water and muck slurry entering the dredge material management area at Lake Seminole.*



*Tampa Bay.*

nutrient concentrations in the lake and to meet targeted water quality goals. In 2006, Lake Seminole was included in the FDEP’s draft verified list of impaired waters for nutrients. Pinellas County developed a Reasonable Assurance Plan (RAP) in 2007, to set forth actions to reduce nutrient loading to Lake Seminole and restore the lake’s water quality. RAP updates were submitted to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) in 2011, 2014 and 2019 outlining the progress made toward the goals set forth in the original RAP. Lake Seminole RAP water quality goals are expressed as annual means for chlorophyll-a (Chl-a) and the Trophic State Index (TSI), a composite measurement used in evaluating the level of enrichment to a water body. Completed projects identified in the Lake Seminole RAP include retrofitting stormwater outflows from five of the highest nutrient loading subbasins and removing nutrient rich sediments from the lake. In 2017, the Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners approved funding, matched with District funding, to dredge nutrient-rich sediment from the lake. Dredging of this sediment is completed and the project is currently in the close-out phase.

**Lake Tarpon** extends over 2,532 acres, making it the largest freshwater lake in the Tampa Bay area. The lake is designated as an Outstanding Florida Water, a fish management area and a District



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

SWIM priority water body. Overall, Lake Tarpon can be described as a water body with excellent sport fishing and healthy submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) habitat.

Despite its healthy status, the lake is currently listed by FDEP as being impaired for chlorophyll-a (a measure of phytoplankton abundance) based on exceedance of the state's Numeric Nutrient Criteria (NNC). The lake is currently, and has been, in compliance with water quality standards for both total nitrogen (TN) and total phosphorus (TP), creating a disconnect between chlorophyll-a and nutrient concentrations. In recent years, Pinellas County and the District have co-funded technical projects to examine this disconnect.

The Lake Tarpon Water Quality Management Plan was completed in 2017. One of the findings of this report was that chlorophyll-a concentrations were a function of residence time and lake levels and not nutrient loading. The plan also found that healthy plant communities in the lake coincided with periods of improved chlorophyll-a concentrations. Pinellas County submitted a petition to FDEP for development of Type III Site Specific Alternative Criteria (SSAC) for Nutrients. In January 2024, FDEP published a draft report proposing Type III nutrient SSAC that were developed using data from a period when the lake supported a healthy plant community while accounting for fluctuation in chlorophyll-a above FDEP's generally applicable criterion.

The findings of these studies have been considered during the update to the Lake Tarpon SWIM Plan. The District has coordinated closely with FDEP and Pinellas County regarding the SSAC to ensure that the goals and management strategies in the SWIM plan update are not in conflict with the SSAC. Additionally, during development of the SWIM Plan update, two technical stakeholders' workshops were held to ensure coordination with agencies and local governments that manage water resources in the Lake Tarpon watershed.

**Lake Thonotosassa**, the largest natural lake in Hillsborough County with a surface area of greater than 800 acres, is popular for recreational use as it is one of the few natural lakes in the area with public access. The lake discharges into the Hillsborough River, which is used for the City of Tampa's municipal water supply and the lake

is designated as a District SWIM priority water body.

Challenges exist in the Lake Thonotosassa watershed. Nutrient loadings from the watershed have caused extreme nutrient enrichment resulting in algal blooms within the lake. Habitat quality and species diversity have declined. Nonnative plant species are more abundant, while availability of desirable sport fish has decreased.

The District completed a nutrient source tracking project with Hillsborough County to identify nutrient sources in the watershed. Areas with high nutrient loadings were prioritized for projects, such as stormwater improvement projects, maintenance/control of exotic plants, enhancement of wetland and aquatic habitats and public education and awareness of stormwater pollution prevention. As part of this implementation, the District's FARMS and SWIM programs are coordinating with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to work with agriculture operations in the watershed to implement BMPs. During 2018 and 2019, the District participated in FDEP's development of a nutrient TMDL for Lake Thonotosassa, which was adopted by FDEP in July 2019.



*Lake Tarpon.*



*Underwater photo of submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV).*



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Heartland Planning Region – SWUCA Recovery

### PRIORITY:

Implement the SWUCA Recovery Strategy

### OBJECTIVES:

- Achieve 40 mgd of offsets in groundwater withdrawals in the SWUCA by 2025
- Achieve the SWUCA SWIMAL for the upper Floridan aquifer to slow the rate of saltwater intrusion in the MIA
- Assist in recovering the minimum flows for the upper Peace River through implementation of the Lake Hancock Lake Level Modification project
- Recover minimum levels for Polk County and Highlands County lakes by 2025
- Ensure a sustainable water supply
  - Achieve and maintain daily 150-gallon compliance per capita with all public supply utilities
  - Achieve and maintain a reduction in 2011-2015 regional average unadjusted gross per capita (111 gpcd) water use by 4.3% to 106 gpcd by 2025. This represents a water savings of 3.8 mgd
  - Assist Polk Regional Water Cooperative (PRWC) in the development of 30 mgd of alternative water supply sources and implementation of water conservation programs identified in its demand management plan
  - Increase percentage of total water use supplied by alternative sources
  - Maximize the water conservation potential for the region
  - Maximize regional interconnects among public supply utilities
  - Complete the next updates for the District and Central Florida Water Initiative (CFWI) RWSPs by 2025
  - Achieve 75% utilization of all wastewater flows and a 75% resource benefit by 2040 and assist in the implementation of potable reuse
    - As of 2023, the Heartland region had 44.4 mgd of wastewater flow and 22.6 mgd of reuse for a utilization rate of approximately 51%

### HIGHLIGHT:

Most of the District's Heartland Planning Region falls within the eight-county SWUCA, which encompasses approximately 5,100 square miles. In the SWUCA, depressed aquifer levels have caused saltwater intrusion along the coast, contributed to reduced flows in the upper Peace

River and lowered lake levels in portions of Polk and Highlands counties.

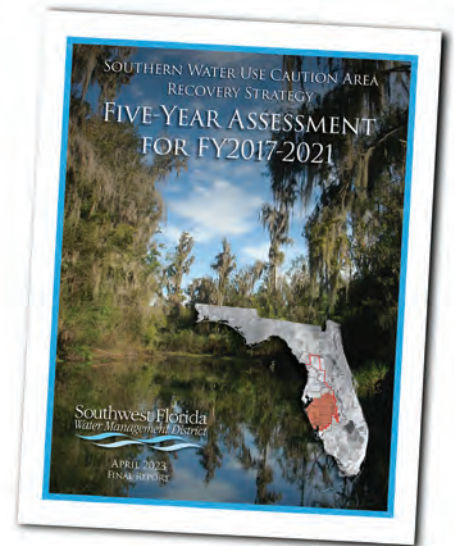
Groundwater withdrawals were identified as the primary cause of the depressed aquifer levels throughout the groundwater basin, with drawdowns in some areas exceeding 50 feet.

Through fiscal year 2024, the District has adopted MFLs for 50 priority water bodies in the SWUCA and approximately 86% of these MFLs are being met. An MFL is the limit or water level at which further withdrawals would be significantly harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area. The District adopted the SWUCA Recovery Strategy to achieve MFLs that are not being met by reducing the rate of saltwater intrusion in the MIA, restoring flows to the upper Peace River and increasing water levels at lakes in the Ridge area, which extends roughly 90 miles along the center of the state in Polk and Highlands counties.

### Primary SWUCA Recovery Strategy elements for this region include:

- Updating the RWSP to identify how to address growing regional water needs while minimizing impacts to water resources and related natural systems
  - The District approved a plan update in 2020, with the next update underway and scheduled for completion in 2025
- Providing financial and regulatory incentives for conservation, construction of alternative supplies and regional interconnections
- Monitoring and reporting

As described in the most recent SWUCA Recovery Strategy five-year assessment, the District has been successful in multiple efforts associated with its SWUCA goals. Partnering with the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority (PRMRWSA), the District has assisted in developing a sustainable water supply to meet the needs of a four-county region within the SWUCA. The District has also assisted with the creation of the PRWC and is helping to fund its evaluation and development of AWS projects, including water conservation. The FARMS Program and other water conservation efforts have reduced Upper Floridan groundwater withdrawals in the SWUCA, which has helped to increase groundwater levels in the MIA.



A soil moisture sensor that relays readings back to a central control unit to indicate irrigation needs to the grower.



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

The SWIMAL elevation established for the upper Floridan aquifer in the MIA must be met or exceeded for five consecutive years for recovery. This elevation was met or exceeded from 2018 through 2022, leading to the SWIMAL being achieved for the first time. This accomplishment represents an important step towards slowing the rate of saltwater intrusion in the region.

The District's Lake Hancock Lake Level Modification Project became fully operational in 2014 and a reservation was established in 2020 for water stored in Lake Hancock and released to lower Saddle Creek to help recover minimum flows in the upper Peace River. Implementation of the project and the reservation supported achievement of MFLs established for all three upper river sites in 2020, and again in 2021 and 2022. Recovery in the upper Peace River has also led to improvements in low-flow conditions in the lower portion of the river. Ridge lake water levels have increased several feet since the 1990s, but some lake MFLs in the SWUCA continue to not be met. Reevaluation of these MFLs by 2025 using new, updated lake-level methods and peer-reviewed wetland criteria will support future assessment of recovery needs.

While the southern two-thirds of Polk County is included in the SWUCA, all of Polk County is part of the designated CFWI planning area. The CFWI planning area includes all of Polk, Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties and the southern portion of Lake County. The boundaries of the St. Johns River, South Florida and Southwest Florida water management districts meet in the planning area.

The District is collaborating with the other water management districts, the state and local governments and utilities to identify a sustainable water supply for the CFWI planning region. Key successes in meeting the water resource challenges of the area have included refinement of a shared groundwater model to determine regional resource availability and the publication of the second CFWI RWSP in 2020. Ongoing efforts include coordination and planning for water resource data collection needs, establishment of consistent water use permitting rules among the three water management districts with jurisdiction in the CFWI planning area and development of the 2025 RWSP.

Within the CFWI, the need for 30 mgd of AWS sources in the Polk County area was identified. The District assisted in the establishment of the PRWC in 2017 as a collaborative entity to address water supply needs among its member governments and is currently coordinating with the PRWC on development of AWS projects and maximizing water conservation efforts to meet projected 2040 water supply demands. These efforts include implementation of a long-term demand management plan and District investigation of the lower Floridan aquifer as a potential alternative water supply source. Through FY2023, the Governing Board allocated \$65 million to the Polk Partnership Fund for implementation of selected project, with \$30.5 million contributed from the Fund towards these projects in FY2024. The PRWC is developing both the Southeast and West Polk lower Floridan Aquifer Wellfield projects. Third-party reviews of the preliminary designs were evaluated in 2022 and approved by the District for funding assistance with final design and construction phases. Contractor bidding for the Southeast Wellfield Facility is underway as of late 2024, and construction of the Southeast Regional Transmission has commenced. The West Polk Wellfield design is ongoing. Water conservation efforts and demand management plans will help extend the resources developed through these expensive AWS projects.



*Peace River.*



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Heartland Planning Region – Improve Water Bodies

### PRIORITY:

Improve Winter Haven Chain of Lakes and Ridge Lakes

### OBJECTIVE:

- Implement plans and projects for water quality and natural systems improvement

### HIGHLIGHT:

The **Winter Haven Chain of Lakes** is a system of 19 interconnected lakes in Polk County within a combined 32-square-mile watershed. Designated as a District SWIM priority water body, the chain includes two major groups, with five lakes in the northern chain and 14 in the southern chain. A series of constructed canals connect the lakes and enhance recreational access throughout the chain.

Two main challenges exist in the Winter Haven Chain of Lakes watershed: nutrient loading from urban runoff and the loss of natural systems. The District is working with local governments through its cooperative funding program to reduce nutrient loadings by improving stormwater management and to restore natural systems which can also improve water quality and provide additional environmental benefits.

Success will be measured by water quality improvements, including those associated with reductions in non-point source loading of nutrients and areal increases in restored natural systems. Additionally, lakes with sufficient water quality data will be evaluated using Florida's numeric nutrient criteria.

Water quality improvement projects have been implemented for eight lakes in the chain (Conine, Howard, May, Lulu, Hartridge, Jessie, Cannon and Mariana). In addition, more than 30 low impact development (LID) best management projects have been installed within the downtown area of the City of Winter Haven.

Approximately 130 lakes lie within the **Ridge Lakes** area, which extends roughly 90 miles along the center of the state in Polk and Highlands counties. The high number of deep sinkhole basin lakes makes this region uniquely different from the other lake regions in the District and throughout the state.

Declining water quality, due to nutrient loading from the watershed, remains a challenge for lakes in the Ridge Lakes area. Common water quality impacts include stormwater runoff, wastewater effluent, residential fertilizer applications, agricultural runoff, shoreline habitat degradation and hydrologic alterations. Through the District's Ridge Lakes Restoration Initiative, emphasis has been placed on protective lake management strategies. Stormwater treatment has been a high priority, as well as enhancement and restoration of natural systems and additional flood protection.

The District-led Ridge Lakes Plan update was completed in 2019. The project's purpose was to propose lake-specific action plans and conceptual designs for prioritized lakes. In addition, a general action plan was also developed for the non-prioritized lakes to provide a path forward to further efforts in the Ridge Lakes. Data needs are identified for lakes without sufficient water quality information. Of the 136 lakes studied, 21 are impaired or potentially impaired for one or more nutrients, 23 are not impaired and more than 94 lakes do not have enough water quality data to determine impairments. Improved monitoring plans were recommended for the 94 lakes with insufficient data. Conceptual designs for water quality improvement projects were prepared for 12 prioritized lakes. The plan will be used to work with local governments to develop projects and programs aimed at water quality improvements.



*Sandhill Cranes on a lake.*



*Lake Howard.*



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Southern Planning Region – SWUCA Recovery

### PRIORITY:

Implement the SWUCA Recovery Strategy

### OBJECTIVES:

- Achieve 40 mgd of offset in groundwater withdrawals in the SWUCA by 2025
- Achieve the SWUCA SWIMAL for the upper Floridan aquifer to slow the rate of saltwater intrusion in the MIA
- Ensure a sustainable water supply
  - Achieve and maintain 150-gallon daily compliance per capita with all public supply utilities
  - Assist the Peace River Manasota Regional Water Supply Authority in the development of 21 mgd of alternative supply sources
- Achieve and maintain a reduction in 2011-2015 regional average unadjusted gross per capita (84 gpcd) water use by 5.2% to 79.7 gpcd by 2025, a water savings of 4.7 mgd
  - Maximize water conservation
  - Maximize public supply interconnects
  - Achieve 75% utilization of all wastewater flows and a 75% resource benefit by 2040.
    - As of 2023, the Southern region had 75.9 mgd of wastewater flow and 50.3 mgd of reuse for a utilization rate of approximately 66%
  - Develop ASR options for potable and reclaimed water supply
  - Increase the percentage of total water use supplied by alternative sources
  - Continue assessing the viability of using excess runoff in Flatford Swamp for improving groundwater levels in the MIA

### HIGHLIGHT:

The entire Southern region of the District falls within the eight-county SWUCA. Within the approximate 5,100-square-mile SWUCA, depressed aquifer levels have caused saltwater intrusion along the coast, contributed to reduced flows in the upper Peace River and lowered lake levels in areas of Polk and Highlands counties. Groundwater withdrawals are the primary cause of the depressed aquifer levels throughout the region, with drawdowns in some areas exceeding 50 feet.

Through fiscal year 2024, the District has adopted MFLs for 50 water bodies in the SWUCA and approximately 86% of these MFLs are being met. An MFL is the limit or water level at which further withdrawals would be significantly

harmful to the water resources or ecology of the area. The District adopted the SWUCA Recovery Strategy in 2006 to address MFLs not being met by reducing the rate of saltwater intrusion in the MIA, restoring flows to the upper Peace River and increasing water levels at lakes in the Ridge area, which extends roughly 90 miles along the center of the state in Polk and Highlands counties.

### Primary SWUCA Recovery Strategy elements for this region include:

- Updating the RWSP to identify how to address growing regional water needs while minimizing impacts to the water resources and related natural systems
  - The District approved a plan update in 2020, with the next update underway and scheduled for completion in 2025
- Providing financial incentives for water conservation, development of alternative supplies and regional interconnections
- Monitoring and reporting

The District has been successful in multiple efforts associated with its SWUCA goals, as noted in the recently completed five-year assessment of the ongoing SWUCA Recovery Strategy. Partnering with the PRMRWSA, the District has assisted in developing a sustainable water supply to meet the needs of a four-county region within the SWUCA. The District has also assisted with the creation of the PRWC and is helping to fund its evaluation and development of AWS, including water conservation. The FARMS Program and other water conservation efforts have reduced Upper Floridan groundwater withdrawals in the SWUCA, which in turn has helped to increase groundwater levels in the MIA.

Since the 1970s, the Quality of Water Improvement Program (QWIP) has prevented waste and contamination of water resources (both groundwater and surface water) by reimbursing landowners for plugging abandoned or improperly constructed artesian wells. The program focuses on the southern portion of the District where the upper Floridan Aquifer (UFA) is under artesian conditions, creating the potential for mineralized groundwater to migrate upward and contaminate shallower aquifers or surface waters. The program reimburses approximately 200 well-pluggings per year, with more than 7,700 well-pluggings reimbursed since its inception.



Lake Hancock.

The SWIMAL elevation established for the upper Floridan aquifer in the MIA must be met or exceeded for five consecutive years. This elevation was met or exceeded from 2018 through 2022, resulting in the achievement of the SWIMAL for the first time. This compliance with the SWIMAL represents an important milestone for meeting the recovery strategy goal of slowing saltwater intrusion in the region.

Based on groundwater modeling, the District's Flatford Swamp Aquifer Recharge project continues to show promise in its potential to help to support SWIMAL recovery, as well to slow saltwater intrusion by recharging the Floridan aquifer system near the MIA. As of July 2023, the test recharge well, monitoring wells and surface water facilities have all been completed, and operational testing of the system is underway.

The District's Lake Hancock Lake Level Modification project became fully operational in 2014 and a reservation was established in 2020 for water stored in Lake Hancock and released to lower Saddle Creek to help meet the minimum flows in the upper Peace River. Recovery in the upper Peace River, where MFLs established for all three sites in the river segment were achieved in 2020, 2021 and 2022, has led to improvements in low-flow conditions in the lower portion of the river. Ridge lake water levels have increased several feet since the 1990s, but some lake MFLs in the SWUCA continue to not be met. Reevaluation of these MFLs by 2025 using updated lake-level methods and new, peer reviewed wetland criteria will support future assessment of recovery needs.

# Regional Priorities and Objectives

## Southern Planning Region – Improve Water Bodies

### PRIORITY:

Improve Charlotte Harbor, Sarasota Bay, Shell/Prairie/Joshua Creeks

### OBJECTIVES:

- Develop plans and implement projects for water quality improvement
- Develop plans and implement projects to restore natural systems

### HIGHLIGHT:

**Charlotte Harbor** is Florida's second largest open water estuary at 270 square miles. Generally considered one of the most productive estuarine ecosystems in southwest Florida, the harbor is designated an "Estuary of National Significance" and a SWIM priority water body.

Challenges for the 4,400-square-mile Charlotte Harbor watershed include alteration and loss of wetlands, an increase in nonnative plant species, water quality degradation from point and non-point source pollutants and seagrass loss.

The success indicator for this system (as reported in the November 2020 update to the Charlotte Harbor SWIM Plan) is to maintain seagrass cover for Charlotte Harbor proper and Lemon Bay, including Dona and Roberts Bay, at 2016 levels (23,503 acres). As of 2022, total mapped seagrass acreage was 17,392 acres. This represents a continued sharp decline since 2018 and the lowest acreage reported since the District began mapping seagrass habitat in 1988. The District's seagrass mapping program has been the most relied upon metric for tracking the overall health of our estuaries, including Charlotte Harbor and Lemon Bay. Seagrass habitat is mapped every two years using a combination of aerial imagery and intensive field surveys.

The District participates with other government agencies through the Coastal and Heartland National Estuary Partnership to update and implement the comprehensive conservation and management plan, and implement water quality and hydrologic alteration improvement projects to restore coastal upland, wetland and intertidal habitats.

As of 2024, the District and its cooperators have completed 30 natural systems projects, which have restored over 5,300 acres of coastal habitats for Charlotte Harbor. The District and



its partners have completed 13 water quality projects treating approximately 153 square miles of contributing area for the watershed.

**Sarasota Bay** is designated as an "Estuary of National Significance" and a SWIM priority water body. Like Charlotte Harbor, challenges to this 150-square-mile watershed include changes to coastal uplands, loss of wetlands, increases in nonnative plant species and water quality degradation from point and non-point source pollutants and more recently significant losses in seagrass habitat.

From 2008 to 2018, seagrass acreage for Sarasota Bay remained relatively consistent. However, in 2022, Sarasota Bay like its neighbors to the north and south, continued experiencing significant declines, reducing seagrass acreage to a 15-year low. Despite these losses, seagrass

acreage remains above 1988 totals. Field verification has proven some areas are starting to recolonize but are too sparse to be included during aerial imagery mapping. The next seagrass mapping results based on imagery acquired over the winter of 2023-2024 will be released in early 2025.

The District is working with other government agencies on Sarasota Bay initiatives. These include assisting with the update to the Sarasota Bay Estuary Program's comprehensive



Sarasota Bay.



# Regional Priorities and Objectives

conservation and management plan, implementation of water quality improvement projects and restoration of coastal upland, wetland and intertidal habitats. As of 2024, the District and its partners have completed 14 projects to provide water quality treatment for 70 square miles of watershed contributing to Sarasota Bay. Additionally, 39 projects restoring more than 950 acres of coastal habitats have been completed in Sarasota Bay.

## **Shell, Prairie and Joshua Creek (SPJC)**

watersheds are in the southern region of the Peace River Basin. Combined, the SPJC watersheds comprise a surface area of 487 square miles, or approximately 20% of the Peace River Basin.

The City of Punta Gorda obtains its potable water supply from the Shell Creek in-stream reservoir. Prairie and Shell creeks (and associated tributaries) are designated as Class I waters, which means they are designated for use as potable water supplies.

Groundwater withdrawals for agricultural irrigation created mineralized water quality issues in the SPJC watersheds. The FARMS Program was created in 2003 with the goal of improving the watersheds' water quality. Through BMP implementation, the FARMS Program has partnered with producers to reduce groundwater use by capturing runoff in tailwater recovery ponds and reusing the water for irrigation. This reduces the amount of mineralized groundwater used within the watershed and results in downstream water quality benefits.

A key success indicator is the reduction of total dissolved solids (TDS) in these surface waters. Through the implementation of FARMS Program projects and other initiatives, water quality concentrations for chloride, specific conductance and TDS measured at key surface water reference sites in the SPJC watersheds have significantly improved. Additionally, these FARMS Program projects have reduced approximately 15.3 mgd of groundwater use, which contributes to SWUCA recovery.



*Centrifugal pumping station.*



*Shell Creek.*



*FARMS tailwater irrigation pumps.*



# Core Business Processes

Managing and protecting the water resources of a 16-county area requires a highly skilled, motivated workforce with the right tools, support and good information to make informed decisions and provide high-quality service to the residents of the District. All the various functions of this workforce have been evaluated and categorized into nine core business processes. To successfully achieve our Strategic Initiatives and Regional Priorities, the District must excel in each of these.

## WATER RESOURCES PLANNING AND MONITORING

Water Resources Planning and Monitoring encompasses surface water and groundwater resource evaluations and other comprehensive planning efforts in partnership with local, state, regional, federal and other stakeholders. These responsibilities include identifying, collecting, analyzing and disseminating relevant and accurate data and mapping products and providing technical assistance.

Examples include the SWUCA Recovery Strategy Five-Year Assessment, MFLs studies, Regional Water Supply Planning, Strategic Plan update, WMPs, Consolidated Annual Report and reviews of proposed comprehensive plan amendments and large-scale development.

## INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

The District initiates and supports creative, collaborative projects to produce measurable benefits to the environment, water resources and the regional community. The projects address the core mission goals for water supply, flood protection, water quality and natural systems.



Well drilling.

## FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The District's primary funding source is ad valorem taxes, which vary from year to year. In addition to paying for its operating costs, the District provides financial incentives through partnerships with public and private entities on projects that protect and restore the water resources of the region, such as promoting water conservation, developing alternative water supplies, enhancing natural systems and water quality and promoting flood management activities.

The District operates on a pay-as-you-go basis that allows it to make more funding available for projects. The District targets at least 50% of its budget each year for water resources projects.

## REGULATION

Regulation involves multiple permit activities that promote a fair allocation of the water resources, protect wetlands, enforce well construction standards and ensure that new activities do not increase the risk of flooding or degrade water quality. The permitting process also ensures operational performance monitoring of permitted systems to protect the region's citizens and water resources.

The District is committed to protecting its water resources and related natural systems while also providing quality service to the regulated community. The District's Regulation Division is structured to eliminate duplication, increase efficiency and consistency and reduce costs. Centralizing the permitting review process in the District's Tampa office ensures that permit applicants throughout the District are treated consistently. Improved online permitting services make it easier and more convenient to submit a permit application and access permit data.

The District also continues to work with the other water management districts and the FDEP to achieve statewide permitting consistency wherever possible while allowing for regional water resource differences.

## LAND MANAGEMENT

Per Section 373.1391 Florida Statutes, lands titled to the governing boards shall be managed and maintained to the extent practicable, in such a way as to ensure a balance between

public access, general public recreational purposes and restoration and protection of their natural state and condition. Land Management is responsible for maintaining District lands. In its 10,000-square-mile region, the District owns an interest in approximately 460,000 acres of land that provide various water resource benefits. These lands are managed to restore and sustain natural systems, store flood waters, recharge the aquifer and improve water quality. District conservation lands are managed following an adaptive management strategy based on science to achieve land management goals. Land Management staff focus restoration efforts on imperiled natural communities where appropriate. Of the lands owned in fee by the District 99% are available for public recreation. District lands are evaluated periodically to ensure that District areas of responsibility are achieved. Surplus is considered when lands are not necessary for statutory requirements, or that do not benefit the District's areas of responsibility.

In addition, effective July 1, 2022, section 373.036(2)(e), F.S., requires the District to develop a list of critical wetlands to be acquired using funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund (Critical Wetland List). The statute requires the Critical Wetland List to be included in the District's Strategic Plan. In developing the Critical Wetland List, the District must consider the ecological value of the wetland, the effect of the wetland on water quality and flood mitigation, the ecosystem restoration value of the wetland and the inherent susceptibility of the wetland to development due to its geographic location or natural aesthetics. Before adopting or amending the Critical Wetland List, the District must notify the current property owners and allow them to request their property be removed.

The District does not plan to acquire conservation lands using funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund in Fiscal Year 2025. Therefore, the District has not developed a list of critical wetlands as described in section 373.036(2)(e), F.S. However, the District's Florida Forever Workplan identifies conservation lands and lands necessary for water resource development projects or waterbody restoration projects that meet eligibility criteria for acquisition. If the District determines that



# Core Business Processes

funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund are necessary to acquire lands, the Strategic Plan will be updated to include the list described in section 373.036(2)(e), F.S.

## STRUCTURE OPERATIONS

Structure Operations maintains and operates 84 water control structures. Most of these structures are conservation structures that are operated to maintain water levels and provide limited flood relief. The larger flood control structures, like those associated with the Tampa Bypass Canal System, are capable of quickly moving large quantities of water and are operated to maximize flood protection. Structure S-160 on the Tampa Bypass Canal is the largest state-owned flood control structure in Florida.

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

As an information-based organization, high-quality data are critical to making informed decisions that protect and enhance the water resources. Knowledge Management is the practice of systematically and actively collecting, managing, sharing and leveraging an organization's data, information and processes.

As the region's knowledge leader for water resources information, the District collects a variety of regulatory, scientific and socio-economic and business data to support its Strategic Initiatives. While the focus of Knowledge Management activities is on meeting and supporting these initiatives, it is recognized that many public and private stakeholders also rely on this information to meet their business needs. Since FY2016, an emphasis has been placed on building awareness and expanding a culture of Knowledge Management throughout all business units within the agency, as well as improving the documentation, organization, review and storage of key business practices and related supporting documentation (governing documents). During FY2025, the District will continue efforts to organize governing documents to facilitate knowledge sharing, ensure the alignment of division/bureau practices with the Governing Board's policies and executive director procedures and allow for timely retrieval and review of existing governing documents. The focus also will cover streamlined processes for maintenance of updated documents.

Information technology and water resource data collection activities at the District are managed

by a governance procedure, with oversight by a governance committee that includes members of the District's Executive Team. The information technology and data governance process monitors, informs and controls the efficient and effective use of information technology and data collection to ensure these initiatives and associated resource expenditures are in alignment with the strategic direction and priorities of the District. The focus for the future will be on expanding governance processes across all business practices at the District to further supplement the District's Knowledge Management initiatives.

The District promotes consistency of data collection activities by coordinating with local, regional and state entities through participation on statewide, regional councils and interagency workgroups. The District is also working with the other water management districts and state agencies to implement common replacement standards for equipment; to develop common standards for sharing financial, geospatial, scientific and permit information; and to establish frameworks for joint development of software applications.

## ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is a key to retaining a highly skilled and motivated workforce, the cornerstone of any successful organization. Keeping staff informed and involved promotes good morale and increases productivity. Additionally, engagement extends beyond internal staff.

To manage water resources effectively over a large region, engaging external publics, including citizens, media, elected officials, advisory committees and other stakeholders is also critical. Outreach and education engage these various groups to foster behaviors, secure funding and assist in developing laws that conserve, protect and sustain Florida's water and related natural resources. Also, through its planning and outreach processes the District collaborates with stakeholders and advisory committees to help meet those goals. Input from stakeholders and advisory committees is used by the Governing Board to make water resource decisions.

Engagement helps to communicate those shared interests, forging relationships that support collaboration to benefit the region's water and related resources, economic stability and quality of life.

## CYBERSECURITY

As the region's knowledge leader for water resources information, an effective cybersecurity program is vital to protect the trust in and reliability of that information. As the world has become more digitally connected, so has the District and the role of cybersecurity in support of the District's mission and vision. Cybersecurity is an essential component in providing protection of sensitive and critical data, ensuring business continuity, safeguarding the value, integrity and trust of its water resource data, protecting against danger to public health, safety and welfare, meeting statutory and regulatory requirements and defending against evolving cyber threats.

Maintaining security over valuable information and mission critical systems has become a considerable challenge as the cyber-threat landscape has continued to evolve. While the release of common vulnerabilities and exposures has increased by 500% over the last 10 years, updating and upgrading security of every device connected to the District's resources is an ongoing activity that's required as a key element to safeguarding the District's Information Technology (IT) assets.

As new technologies emerge, they must be evaluated not only for their benefits or how they may or may not increase productivity and improve functionality for District staff and systems, but they must also be evaluated against the risk of introducing them into the District's technology environment. In other words, cybersecurity spans the breadth and width of the organization and is essential in every aspect of how the District conducts daily activities. The investment made by the District in cybersecurity is essential to mitigating risks and ensuring the long-term success and resilience of the District.





## Southwest Florida *Water Management District*

VISAV 11-06-2024

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (District) does not discriminate on the basis of disability. This nondiscrimination policy involves every aspect of the District's functions, including access to and participation in the District's programs, services and activities. Anyone requiring reasonable accommodation, or who would like information as to the existence and location of accessible services, activities, and facilities, as provided for in the Americans with Disabilities Act, should contact the Human Resources Office Chief, at 2379 Broad St., Brooksville, FL 34604-6899; telephone (352) 796-7211 or 1-800-423-1476 (FL only); or email [ADACoordinator@WaterMatters.org](mailto:ADACoordinator@WaterMatters.org). If you are hearing or speech impaired, please contact the agency using the Florida Relay Service, 1-800-955-8771 (TDD) or 1-800-955-8770 (Voice). If requested, appropriate auxiliary aids and services will be provided at any public meeting, forum, or event of the District. In the event of a complaint, please follow the grievance procedure located at [WaterMatters.org/ADA](http://WaterMatters.org/ADA).