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CONTACT: Katelyn Potter, Communications Director
Suwannee River Water Management District
386.362.1001 or 800.226.1066 (FL)
SRWMDCommunications@SRWMD.org
www.mysuwanneeriver.com



Students from Branford High School FFA designed and mowed the sorghum maze in time for Halloween using GIS technology.

FROM FEED TO MAZE: GIS TECHNOLOGY MAPS THE COURSE

LIVE OAK, FLA., Nov. 6, 2017 – A sorghum field turned maze is providing learning opportunities for Branford High School FFA students on the use and benefits of geographic mapping technologies and their uses throughout the Suwannee River Water Management District (District). The District worked with students to format, map and create a jack-o-lantern-themed sorghum maze using geographic information systems (GIS) and geographic position systems (GPS) technologies.

“Educating young minds on the benefits of precision agricultural technology cultivates a mindset of conservation at an early age,” said Hugh Thomas, Executive Director for the District. “Showcasing the opportunities to use the sorghum for more than just feed (its typical use) and create a value-added feature (like the maze) encourages stewardship and ingenuity as well.”

For the past seven years, District staff have worked with students to illustrate the general functions and applications of GIS technology, as well as the process of transferring paper design to project implementation. Students then create the maze design themselves and work with District staff to convert the information into points, lines and spatial locations that can be mapped using GIS software. Once designed and plotted, a mower is used to create the maze.



A mower and flagging tape are used to create paths through the sorghum to build the maze.

“We look forward to this project every fall,” said Paul Buchanan, GIS Manager for the District. “Seeing the students’ maze designs and helping bring those to life is very rewarding.”

The District has had a long-standing relationship working with Branford High School FFA. The land used for growing the sorghum was leased to the high school from the District for a number of years and was later conveyed to the school board in December 2015.

“These students are helping grow the use of technology for precision agricultural practices in our community,” said Joel Carnow, GIS Analyst II. “The knowledge they are gaining will continue to support the Suwannee Valley as a leader in agricultural technology for water and nutrient conservation.”

GIS technology is used in a variety of ways to support the District’s mission including mapping critical natural resources, improving nutrient and water application for producers, mapping flood and topographical information and more. To encourage efficient technologies in schools, the District provides grants up to \$2,000 to area high schools for projects in water and fertilizer application efficiency which helps improve water quality and reduce water use.

For more information on the District’s grant opportunities, visit www.mysuwanneeriver.com, search “Grants” or call 386.362.1001.

The mission of the Suwannee River Water Management District is to protect and manage water resources using science-based solutions to support natural systems and the needs of the public. The District holds true to the belief of water for nature, water for people. Headquartered in Live Oak, Florida, the District serves 15 surrounding north-central Florida counties.

For more information about the District, visit www.mysuwanneeriver.com or follow us on Facebook and Twitter, search @SRWMD.

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