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HIGH TECH FARMING HELPS IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

LIVE OAK, FLA., Nov. 30, 2017 – Innovative technologies are providing farmers and producers in the Suwannee River Water Management District (District) the opportunity to try new agricultural techniques and equipment aimed at improving water quality through precision fertilizer and nutrient application.

Provided by the District in partnership with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Precision Agriculture Program offers \$2 million in new cost-share/grant funding for area farmers to implement cutting-edge technologies that improve water quality. The program is estimated to reduce 1.3 million pounds of nitrogen across more than 50,000 acres within the District.

“Ensuring healthy water quality is paramount to the longevity of our springs and natural resources,” said Hugh Thomas, Executive Director for the District. “We are taking aggressive action to create opportunities for producers to explore new methods and embrace cutting-edge technologies at reduced costs.”

The program focuses primarily on row crop farming and includes a variety of technologies for the applicant to choose from including: tissue sampling, soil quality testing, soil nutrient mapping, variable rate nutrient and irrigation application, aerial imagery and fertigation (a process which applies fertilizer directly to each individual plant).

Due to tight profit margins in most agricultural practices, many producers are often limited in their ability to adopt new technologies due to cost. The program allows farmers to experiment, and ultimately adopt, precision agricultural practices without bearing the full financial risk. Therefore, helping to remove barriers to entry.

District staff worked with producers, researchers and subject matter experts across the country to identify technologies with the greatest return on water quality while maintaining, if not improving, crop yields.

“Historically, agricultural interests have sometimes been perceived to compete with environmental efforts, said Ben Glass, Program Project Manager for the District. “This program allows our producers to move beyond conventional agricultural practices to realize environment benefits to our resources, while maintaining and even improving economic drivers.”

Since the program’s approval by the District’s Governing Board in September, the District has already received fifty-eight applications for the program totaling more than \$2.5 million. Forty-six applications were selected for the current available funding, and the District is considering other funding opportunities to fulfill the remaining projects.

“We were shocked at how quickly the applications started coming in,” said Glass. “There is a tremendous interest in our area for water quality research and water quality improvement practices in agriculture.”

To receive funding, recipients are required to enter a contractual agreement that includes water monitoring and data reporting. However, the proof is in the production – these practices have been proven successful to reduce inputs and improve yields amongst researchers and producers in other parts of the country.

“The Suwannee Valley region continues to be on the cutting edge for agricultural advancements for water quality improvement and water conservation,” said Thomas. “Our mission at the District is to provide programs and opportunities for producers to continue the work they love for generations to come, while improving the health of our natural resources.”

The District offers a variety of grant and cost-share programs to aid local governments, municipalities, farmers, producers and schools with water conservation, water quality, habitat restoration and flood prevention projects. For more information, visit www.mysuwanneeriver.com, search “Cost Share.”

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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