



2021-2025 Strategic Plan

Suwannee River Water Management District

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ADA Statement

Americans with Disabilities Act: The District does not discriminate upon the basis of any individual's disability status. This nondiscrimination policy involves every aspect of the District's functions including one's access to, participation, employment, or treatment in its programs or activities. Anyone requiring reasonable accommodation as provided for in the Americans with Disabilities Act should contact the District at 386.362.1001 or 800.226.1066 (Florida only). The District's fax number is 386.362.1056.



Virginia Johns,
Chair

Governing Board Members

Virginia H. Johns
Chair

Richard Schwab
Vice Chair

Charles Keith
Secretary/Treasurer

Virginia Sanchez

Harry Smith

Larry Sessions

Message from the Chair

The Springs Heartland has long been renowned for its unique, breathtaking beauty and abundance of water. For generations, People have flocked to the area to enjoy the bountiful resources that seem infinite. In those days, major water resource challenges were concentrated in areas far away from the Suwannee River Valley. However, today, environmental changes, land use changes, rising temperatures, societal interests, and an ever-growing population, have brought these challenges to our doorstep, increasing the demand for our attention.

The Suwannee River Water Management District's (District) commitment to ensure an adequate water supply, improving water quality, protecting natural systems, and providing flood protection has grown to meet the increasing challenges, with the help of greater scientific advancements and robust data monitoring.

Through the establishment of the new Lower Santa Fe Ichetucknee River minimum flow minimum water levels (MFL), as well as the anticipated Upper Suwannee River MFL, District staff are working through planning, permitting, and projects to ensure the health of our natural systems and protect our water supply.

Expansion of the water quality monitoring network, strategic project prioritization in critical areas, increased project monitoring, and maximizing nutrient load reductions in stormwater systems will help to reduce nitrate levels as we work to achieve numeric nutrient criteria for water quality.

The District will be better able to serve and protect its communities from flooding through hydrologic and wetlands restoration, enhanced flood elevation studies, educating communities on the importance of land use designations, and increasing the public awareness and use of flood information tools.

Supporting the mission of the District and accomplishing these goals will rely heavily on the ability of the District to continue to strengthen stakeholder partnerships, maintain institutional knowledge, and reduce risk through information and data management.

Despite the challenges before us, the opportunities to serve the residents of North Florida through protection and restoration of our water resources is ever present. I am proud to work alongside my fellow Governing Board members and District staff as we work to safeguard the health of our water resources for today and generations to come.



Agency Overview

Vision

Uniting the region in stewardship and awareness using innovative, science-based solutions to protect and restore our water resources.

Mission

To protect and manage water resources using science-based solutions to support natural systems and the needs of the public.

The District is a regional governmental agency responsible for protecting and managing water resources in north-central Florida. The District is one of five water management districts created by the Florida Legislature with the passage of the Water Resources Act in 1972. A governing board consisting of up to nine members, each of whom live in the District, establishes District policies. Governing board members are unpaid volunteers appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Florida Senate for four-year terms.

While the District is the fifth largest of the five water management districts in geographic area, population served, tax base, and agency staff, it holds many of the most unique and valuable natural resources in Florida. The District encompasses 7,640 square miles in north-central Florida. The District includes all of Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor and Union counties, and parts of Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Jefferson, Levy and Putnam counties. The District contains over 400 documented springs, including the highest concentration of freshwater springs in Florida, and the highest concentration of first-magnitude springs in the United States. Major rivers in the District include the Suwannee, Santa Fe, Withlacoochee, Aucilla, Alapaha, Ichetucknee, Fenholloway, Steinhatchee, Econfinia, Waccasassa, and the Wacissa.

The District is charged by the Legislature with the responsibilities of managing water supply, water quality, flood protection, and natural systems. To meet these responsibilities and its mission, the District has developed goals for the next five years and identified the strategies necessary to accomplish these goals.

Funding

To carry out the mission and vision of this Strategic Plan, the District's budget is comprised of several funding sources. With the smallest tax base of the five water management districts, state legislative appropriations and state and federal grants are critical to accomplish our goals and mission. Grants from state and federal agencies, including the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the United State Geological Survey, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), support District programs and projects. Strong partnerships with local governments and stakeholders are also key to identifying funding opportunities. The District continues to work with its local, state, and federal partners to leverage the funding necessary to achieve the goals set out in this Strategic Plan.

Serving

NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA

Since 1972



Introduction

The Suwannee River Water Management District (District), in accordance with section 373.036(2)(e)(4), Florida Statutes (F.S.), submits an annual strategic plan in lieu of the District Water Management Plan. The strategic plan outlines strategic priorities, goals, strategies, success indicators, funding sources, deliverables, and milestones for District functions. The plan casts a five-year outlook.

Strategic Priorities



WATER QUALITY



WATER SUPPLY



FLOOD PROTECTION



NATURAL SYSTEMS



MISSION SUPPORT



Water Quality

Preserving and Restoring the Foundation of North Florida's Economy

Water quality refers to the chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of water. Data shows persistent elevated nutrient levels, primarily nitrate, in rivers and springs throughout the District. Nitrate, in some instances, is the limiting nutrient that can cause imbalances in the ecosystem and impact the health of springs, rivers, and estuaries. Increased nutrient loads not only adversely impact the ecological health of rivers and springs but also the health of Gulf estuaries downstream.

The FDEP has established a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for the Lower and Middle Suwannee and Santa Fe Rivers of 0.35 mg/L of nitrate as nitrogen (N) in basin management action plans (BMAP). FDEP has established numeric nutrient criteria standards for nitrogen, phosphorus, and chlorophyll a. To meet these targets, nitrate loads from non-point pollution sources need to be reduced anywhere from 30-90 percent on the Suwannee River and associated springs, and 35 percent on the Santa Fe River. To assist the FDEP in achieving these targets, the District partners with state agencies, local governments, landowners, and other stakeholders to implement projects to reduce nutrient loading, including implementing agricultural best management practices (BMPs), stormwater treatment, and erosion control and bank restoration. The District actively monitors nitrate concentrations throughout the District in both groundwater and surface water.

GOAL

Reduce Nitrate Levels to Achieve Water Quality Criteria

Strategies

- Consolidate existing research for nutrient sourcing and identify gaps for additional research needs
- Expand the monitoring network to include strategic sampling and sampling of non-standard parameters
- Develop project monitoring strategies to measure benefits accurately
- Develop a collaborative strategy with stakeholders for project prioritization in BMAP Regions
- Implement projects to assist in meeting BMAP nitrate load reduction targets
- Ensure permit and project authorizations meet statewide water quality criteria for erosion and sediment control
- Develop rule language requiring nutrient load reductions in stormwater systems

Success Indicators and Milestones for Water Quality

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the percentage of Outstanding Florida Springs that meet the state numeric nutrient criteria and the pounds of nitrate reduced by projects receiving District cost-share.





Water Supply

Ensuring a Sustainable Supply of Water for People and the Environment

The District is responsible for managing water resources to ensure there is an adequate supply to satisfy all existing and projected reasonable and beneficial uses while sustaining water resources and protecting natural systems. In the District, over 90 percent of the water supply demands are met with fresh groundwater, virtually all from the Upper Floridan aquifer system. This region's ability to continue to grow and develop is therefore dependent on sustainably managing a growing demand for groundwater. Coordinated water use permitting, water resource planning, and water resource development projects are key to protecting and managing fresh groundwater supply.

Resource planning efforts include water supply assessments and regional water supply planning. Every five years, the District evaluates current and future water supply needs and water supplies within the District. Water supply assessments help determine whether water supplies will be adequate to satisfy projected demands. Recognizing that water supplies are constrained by demands both within and outside of District boundaries, the District works with regional stakeholders to develop planning and permitting guidelines that help to safeguard water supply across shared regions.

The regulation and monitoring of water use within the District is a critical part of managing the resource. Water use permits protect water resources, ensuring proposed uses are reasonable and beneficial, within the public interest, and do not adversely impact existing legal uses. To ensure proposed uses are reasonable and beneficial, the permit application review includes, among other things, an analysis to prevent environmental harm and ensure consistency with established MFLs and prevention or recovery strategies if warranted.

GOAL

Sustainably Manage District Water Resources

Strategies

- Implement projects to reduce groundwater withdrawal impacts in all surface water bodies
- Implement water resource development and alternative water supply projects to ensure an adequate water supply for all reasonable-beneficial uses
- Identify and implement comprehensive feasibility and design studies necessary to evaluate projects
- Research and implement innovations and conservation for stakeholders
- Maximize alternative water supply and reuse benefits
- Achieve 10% or less losses for all public supply systems
- Implement a net resource benefit program
- Develop a collaborative strategy for assisting public utilities with long-range water supply planning prior to water use permit renewals
- Maintain and enhance existing data-driven processes to assess cumulative withdrawals for the potential of harm to water resources and ability to sustain natural systems

Success Indicators and Milestones for Water Supply

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the amount of estimated water supply demand that can be met with projects identified in District water supply plans; and the year-to-year percentage of impact from groundwater use within the District on the aquifer.





Flood Protection

Harnessing Peak Flows of Water to Protect Our Communities and Augment Our Aquifer

The District works with multiple cooperators including the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM), local governments, and landowners to implement regional and local flood protection and flood control projects. Such projects assist local governments to manage, maintain, or expand stormwater infrastructure to better capture runoff, increase stormwater storage, and reduce peak discharge rates.

In addition to flood control projects, the District provides information to the public to reduce and mitigate flood risks. The District partners with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to update floodplain maps to help the public make informed decisions that reduce risk to life and property. Further, the District is the primary source of current flooding information for other agencies and the public, including real-time river levels and rainfall amounts, so that people can make well-informed decisions about flood protection and property at risk.

Through the environmental resource permitting (ERP) Program, the District ensures that development does not result in flooding. Permit reviews are performed to prevent net loss of the 100-year floodplain or increases in flood levels. Permit evaluations also consider specific storm design conditions and potential impacts to upstream and downstream properties.

Goal One

Reduce and Mitigate Flooding Risks

Strategies

- Promote naturally occurring recharge by increasing water storage through hydrologic restoration
- Identify and study 100-year flood elevations of unstudied parcels/areas which are prone to flooding
- Identify unmet flood protection needs of local governments
- Conduct frequent river inspections for unpermitted activities and structures
- Communicate best available data on flood risk to stakeholders

Goal Two

Encourage Non-Structural Flood Plain Management Approaches

Strategies

- Maximize land acquisition and/or development restrictions of land within 100-year floodplain
- Seek opportunities and evaluate all land purchases for flood protection potential
- Coordinate with appropriate governmental entities on data sharing and consistency for flood forecasts
- Increase public awareness of flood protection tools, permit requirements, and flood risks
- Strategically partner with stakeholders to identify and implement flood projects
- Coordinate with FDEP to develop a consistent message to evaluate flood risk of single-family homes

Goal Three

Prepare Communities for Sea Level Rise Impacts

- Conduct vulnerability and risk assessment studies in coastal communities to assess freshwater accessibility threatened by sea level rise (SLR)
- Identify strategic District land acquisition opportunities
- Incorporate SLR impacts in Water Supply Plans and coastal MFLs
- Initiated interdistrict coordination regarding rules and regulations to address SLR
- Conduct outreach with coastal communities regarding SLR data and implications

Success Indicators and Milestones for Flood Control

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the percent of acreage of riverine floodplain under protection; whether the District's cost-share programs have funded at least one flood control project each year; funding opportunities identified for the Dixie County surface water management projects; the acres of hydrologic restoration implemented and maintained, as well as the associated recharge benefits; and the number of compliance cases addressed, and trainings provided.





Natural Systems

Maintaining the Ecosystem Services Provided by the Natural Resources of the District

District projects, regulations, and land acquisition and management activities protect and restore the overall health of the ecological system. As discussed above, hydrologic restoration projects in the District re-establish and improve natural systems such as wetlands, floodplains, native ecological communities, and aquifer recharge areas, which provide valuable water resource functions including water quality treatment, water supply, flood water conveyance and attenuation, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation.

The District establishes minimum flows and minimum water levels (MFLs) for priority rivers, springs, and lakes to ensure there is an adequate supply of water to support natural systems. MFLs are established to prevent significant harm to the water resources and ecology of an area resulting from water withdrawals permitted by the District. MFLs define how much water body levels and/or flows may change and still prevent significant harm.

Through land acquisition and conservation easements, the District protects wetlands, floodplains, lakes, rivers, estuaries and related resources. Land management strategies include prescribed fire to restore and enhance habitat and natural communities and, where appropriate, the promotion of sustainable forestry activities. ERP evaluations consider avoidance and minimization of impacts to wetlands and other natural systems. Additionally, permit reviews address erosion and sedimentation control measures, thereby protecting wetlands, Outstanding Florida Waters, and improving water quality to receiving water bodies.

Goal One

Establish Minimum Flows and Minimum Water Levels for Priority Water Bodies

Strategies

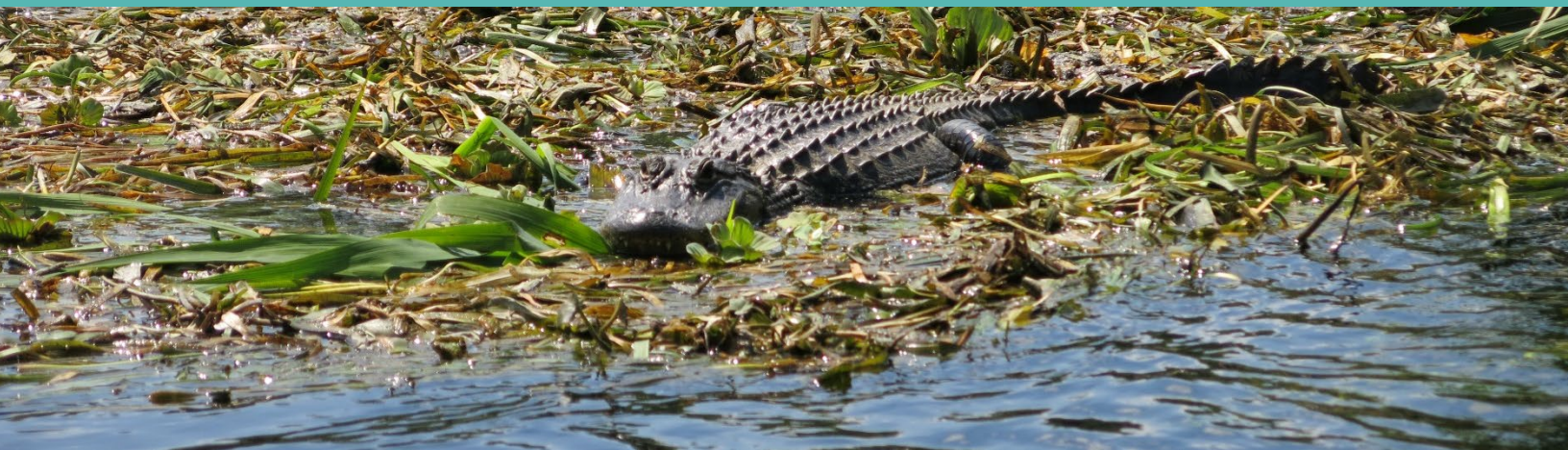
- Implement the approved MFL priority list
- Conduct scheduled MFL water body status assessments
- Maintain the District monitoring network to establish and assess MFLs
- Evaluate existing and new water resource value criteria
- Update and refine MFL methodology

Goal Two

Steward District Lands to Balance the Needs of Natural Resources and People

Strategies

- Manage District lands to achieve the highest natural resource value possible, leading the region in quality of public lands, while still generating sustainable revenue streams from the properties
- Implement and support the District Land Management Plan





Goal Three

Preserve and Protect Water Resources

Strategy

- Document permit mitigation and conservation easements in a GIS format

Goal Four

Optimize Public Use of District Lands

Strategies

- Optimize maintenance and restoration of District land and resources
- Focus communication and outreach efforts on land management opportunities to maximize exposure and encourage public use

Success Indicators and Milestones for Natural Systems

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the completion of MFLs for all remaining priority water bodies per the District schedule; and the quantity of water (MGD) achieved from conservation and water resource development projects under contract with the District. The success of the District's land acquisition and management goals and strategies will be determined by the number of acres acquired and disposed of; the number of acres acquired by the District that enhance aquifer recharge or flood protection; the number of acres of restored hydrology; and the number of acres of prescribed fire and invasive plant treatment.



Mission Support

Creating a Culture of Excellence, Efficiency, and Passion for the Region's Resources

Investing in and empowering District employees is critical to achieving the goals set out in this strategic plan. As the fifth-largest water management district, District employees often perform multiple tasks, performing the job functions of two or three employees. Engaging employees, providing development opportunities, and leadership support helps to ensure staff have the tools and guidance to achieve District goals. Operational efficiency is also an important focus so employees and District operations can be as effective as possible. Utilization of technology to assist employees to perform their tasks is critical to the quality of service the District is able to provide.

Goal One

Reduce Risks Through the Management of Information and Data

Strategies

- Implement a District-wide comprehensive data management system including, but not limited to, hydrologic conditions, water use, water quality, permitting data, flood zones, flood occurrence, land use changes, land acquisition, surplus properties, projects, and project benefits
- Collect and manage high quality information to allow for data-driven, science-based decision making in water resource projects, flood hazard information, and water resource protection
- Reduce paper and place-bound information access by maximizing cloud-based file storage and automated authorization
- Optimize accessibility in facilities and information

Goal Two

Maintain Institutional Knowledge

Strategies

- Establish programmatic documentation that captures and identifies necessary steps to complete or implement essential work functions, priority project tasks objectives, and other critical processes to maintain consistent program standards and provide efficient transfer of institutional knowledge
- Retain employees through succession planning, mentoring, and professional development initiatives

Goal Three

Strengthen Stakeholder Relationships and Partnerships

Strategies

- Build accuracy trust in District messages, staff, and science through factual, transparent, consistent, and standardized engagements with internal and external stakeholders
- Increase public awareness of District functions in planning, projects, and permitting
- Sustain water resources through education of challenges and maximization of project opportunities
- Engage and educate stakeholders who are critical to water resource sustainability

Success Indicators and Milestones for Mission Support

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the number of professional certifications, graduate degrees, and leadership positions within professional organizations held by its staff; the District's administrative overhead; the percentage of the District's budget utilized for projects that benefit water quality and water quantity; the percentage of the District's budget that is recurring but not funded with recurring revenues; and the percentage of facility repairs identified in the last 10-year facility inspection report that have been addressed.

