



2024-2028 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.





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Chair

Governing Board Members

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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 ensuring 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, community education on the importance of land use designations, and increased 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 440 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.

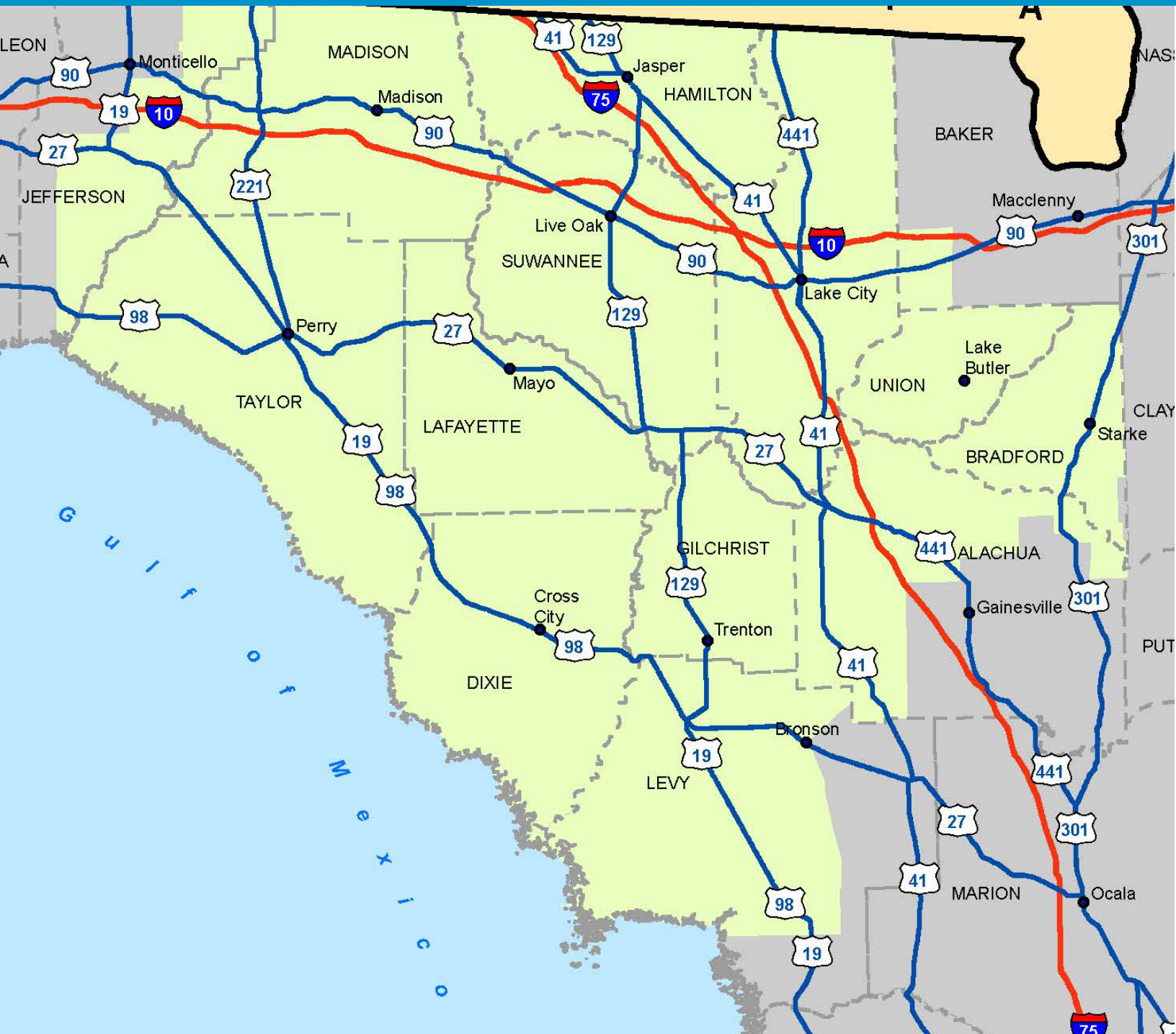
Funding

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



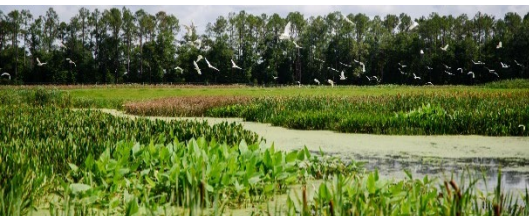
WATER SUPPLY



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 ONE

Support the Reduction of Nitrate Levels

Strategies

- Expand the monitoring network to include strategic sampling
- Develop project monitoring strategies to more accurately estimate or measure benefits
- 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

GOAL TWO

Protect Groundwater

Strategies

- Coordinate permit reviews and projects with FDEP for aquifer recharge
- Collect and maintain high quality biologic and water quality data
- Inspect construction of wells for compliance with construction standards

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

- Develop and update regional water supply assessments and plans
- Identify and implement feasibility and design studies necessary to evaluate projects
- Implement proven innovations and conservation for sustainable agriculture
- Maximize alternative water supply and reuse benefits in permitting and projects
- Prioritize efforts to achieve 10% or less unaccounted-for water losses for all public supply systems
- Implement a net benefit approach to water resource impact offsets
- Engage with public utilities and other stakeholders regarding long-range water supply planning
- 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

Capturing 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

- Prioritize 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 and projects of local governments
- Conduct river inspections for unpermitted activities and structures
- Increase public and stakeholder awareness of flood protection data, tools, permit requirements, and flood risk
- Encourage non-structural flood plain management approaches
- Prioritize preservation of land within 100-year floodplain
- Coordinate with appropriate governmental entities on data sharing and consistency for flood forecasts

Goal Two

Prepare Communities for Sea Level Rise Impacts

- Support vulnerability and risk assessment studies for coastal communities threatened by sea level rise (SLR)
- Identify strategic District conservation easement and land acquisition opportunities
- Incorporate SLR impacts in Water Supply Plans and coastal MFLs
- Support interdistrict coordination efforts to address SLR
- Develop SLR data to assist coastal communities in developing projects and planning

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; funding of at least one flood control project each year; the acres of hydrologic restoration implemented and maintained, recharge benefits; 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/assess MFLs
- Evaluate and improve MFL methods and metrics for the evaluation of water resource values
- Develop recovery and prevention strategies as necessary to protect natural systems

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 the quality of public lands
- Generate sustainable revenue streams while maximizing conservation efforts
- Implement and support the District Land Management Plan
- Focus communication and outreach efforts on land management opportunities to maximize exposure and encourage public use
- Develop operations and maintenance plans for District lands and projects to support the District's core missions

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 data 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 technological efficiencies, cloud-based file storage
- Optimize accessibility in facilities and information
- Maximize automated and linked systems to share and update information, reducing manual uploads and maintenance, thereby improving efficiency and reducing error

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

- Enhance confidence in the District through factual, transparent, and consistent engagements with internal and external stakeholders
- Increase public awareness of District core missions
- Educate stakeholders of their role in 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.



Critical Wetlands Inventory Analysis

On April 27, 2022, Senate Bill 882 was signed into law which requires water management districts to include a critical wetlands inventory analysis list (CWIA) in its strategic plan. The list must be approved by the Governing Board and consider a list of criteria outlined in 373.036, Florida Statutes. Additionally, prior to inclusion on the list, landowners must be notified and given the option to be removed from the list.

Each governing board, in cooperation with local governments, shall develop a list of critical wetlands to be acquired using funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund.

- *The governing boards shall consider all of the following criteria in designating a wetland for inclusion on the list:*
- *The ecological value of the wetland, as determined by the physical and biological components of the environmental system.*
- *The effect of the wetland on water quality and flood mitigation.*
- *The ecosystem restoration value of the wetland.*
- *The inherent susceptibility of the wetland to development due to its geographical location or natural aesthetics*

Before adopting or amending its list of critical wetlands, each governing board must notify the owner of any property that the district contemplates including on the list. At any time, an owner who wishes to have his or her property removed from the list must submit by certified mail to the district a letter requesting such removal. The letter must indicate that the owner wishes for his or her property to be removed from the list and must sufficiently identify such property to the governing board. The governing board shall approve a removal request that meets the requirements of this subparagraph at its next regularly scheduled meeting.

To implement the new requirement, the District assigned staff to various roles for the CWIA process. This working group includes staff with substantial wetland backgrounds, GIS program managers, acquisition specialist, environmental project engineers, minimum flows and levels scientists, and communication specialist. This group was tasked with creating the initial framework for the analysis process and recommending inclusion of some of the known critical wetlands within the confines of this District.

On August 08, 2023, the Governing Board directed staff to develop a project-based workplan for the designation of critical wetlands to be included in the Fiscal Year 2024-2025 Strategic Plan. The District does not plan to seek funding for critical wetlands from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund in Fiscal Year 2024 and therefore, did not include a list of critical wetlands in the FY 2024 Strategic Plan.