

FLORIDA WELL OWNER NETWORK: EXTENSION OUTREACH TO IMPROVE PRIVATE WELL WATER QUALITY AND STEWARDSHIP

Yilin Zhuang¹, Andrea Albertin²

¹UF/IFAS Extension, Central District, Mid-Florida Research and Education Center, Apopka, FL, USA

² UF/IFAS Extension, Northwest District, North Florida Research and Education Center, Quincy, FL, USA

An estimated 2.5 million Floridians rely on private wells for home consumption. Different from public water systems, private wells are not regulated and private well users control the management and protection of their wells. Limited public data exist on how many well users regularly test their water or drink from contaminated wells. To meet the needs of private well users, UF/IFAS Extension developed the Florida Well Owner Network (FWON), a drinking water quality and septic system education program. Our goals are to educate residents about well water quality and best management practices to ensure well and groundwater protection as well as facilitate access to regular well water testing and testing after extreme weather events. To successfully achieve these goals at state and local levels, FWON has brought in multi-level partnerships and collaborations. These include internal and external state specialists, county extension agents, local health departments, water management districts, and state-certified water quality testing labs. Since 2017, over 2,000 well users have been educated about private well management through FWON and 458 people have submitted water samples for bacteria testing. Bacterial contamination was detected in 19% samples during the routine water sampling events and in 38% samples after storms and hurricanes. Annual bacteria testing is recommended, but about 65% participants reported never testing their water, mainly because they did not know where to test it and what to test for. This Extension program not only increases well owners' knowledge of best practices for well management and groundwater protection, but also provides easy access for them to test well water quality to help ensure the safety of their drinking water.

PRESENTER BIO: Yilin Zhuang is the Regional Water Resources Agent in the Central Extension District. Her area of specialization is integrated water resources management in urban and rural environments. Andrea Albertin is the Regional Water Resources Agent in the Northwest Extension District. She specializes in groundwater quality in agricultural and urban areas.