

EMPOWERING THE PUBLIC TO MAKE CHANGE THROUGH WATERSHED EDUCATION AND STEWARDSHIP

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The Florida Waters Stewardship Program (FWSP) was launched in 2016, taking inspiration from successful "Master" water programs across the United States. Its primary mission is to reshape participants' perceptions of water, motivating them to take proactive steps to protect and support local water resources. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, FWSP displayed remarkable adaptability by transitioning to an online format in 2020, followed by a hybrid model in 2021. Currently, the program is operational in Pinellas, Sarasota, Manatee, and Polk counties, demonstrating significant potential for localized impacts.

FWSP employs a comprehensive approach to inform, inspire, and connect participants. It enhances knowledge through professional presentations featuring research-based information. The program fosters a sense of place by conducting class sessions at various locations, each with a water-focused mini-tour to establish a stronger connection with local water resources.

FWSP also promotes a sense of connection by exploring relevant water information, engaging with local stakeholders, and investigating local case studies. Additionally, the program cultivates a sense of possibility by sharing success stories and equipping participants with tools to address contentious water issues.

Expanding networks is a key component, as FWSP builds a sense of community within each class cohort and introduces participants to local guest speakers, fostering connections with water stewardship experts.

Crucially, FWSP emphasizes action. Participants are encouraged and supported in implementing group or individual water stewardship projects, translating their knowledge and enthusiasm into tangible initiatives that benefit local water resources.

Since its inception, FWSP has offered 14, multi-session, 24-contact-hour courses, reaching 239 participants with critically important state and local water resources information. These FWSP course offerings have also resulted in the implementation of over 40 local stewardship projects to improve or educate about local water resources. FWSP highlights the power of education and community engagement in driving positive change.

PRESENTER BIO: Lara is the Natural Resources Agent with UF/IFAS Extension Pinellas County. She earned her masters and bachelors in Natural Resources Conservation from the University of Florida. Lara is also a graduate of the Florida Natural Resources Leadership Institute. Her Extension work focuses on wildlife and water resources.