

EDUCATING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY: INFLUENCING DECISION MAKERS AND THE PUBLIC ON WATER QUALITY

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Sarasota County has experienced dramatic impacts from red tide and other harmful algal blooms in recent years, leading residents to come together to demand action. The County Commission identified water quality as its highest priority issue in 2018 and made significant policy and financial commitments. Educating both decision makers and residents on the complicated issue has continued to be a challenge and Extension was asked to take the lead across all county departments. The initiative has been successful in applying innovative technology-based strategies to educate the greatest numbers.

The most recent effort was the development of a [Water Quality Story Map](#), communicating the diversity of actions taken by the county and the opportunities for residents to make changes in their own backyards. This interactive and appealing online tool took nearly a year to develop, involved over a dozen county staff, and was ultimately presented to the County Commission on May 9, 2023. In addition, there have been annual "Water Quality Virtual Update" webinars summarizing the state of water quality in the county, as well as county and individual actions to make a difference. These live virtual events have reached hundreds and continue to be accessed [online](#). Throughout the year, monthly videos are filmed, interviewing county staff from various departments on the latest water quality accomplishments. Additional efforts include development of a new asynchronous course for neighborhoods on environmental best practices, a contract with a local consulting firm for a creative social media campaign on fertilizer reduction, and much more.

This comprehensive approach using virtual tools to educate the public and decision makers has improved understanding of this complicated issue, increased awareness of the diversity of efforts, and encouraged residents to be part of the solution by implementing changes in their behavior and cultural practices that can affect water quality.

PRESENTER BIO: Michael D'Imperio is the Water Resources Agent with UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County. His work includes outreach and education focused on the protection, enhancement, and awareness of water quality and water supply. Michael specializes in stormwater ponds, drinking water, reclaimed water, water conservation, and practices for reducing non-point source pollution.