

DEVELOPMENT OF PAYMENT FOR WATER SERVICES IN THE NORTHERN EVERGLADES

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As a result of human growth, ecosystem native communities have experienced an alteration of natural water flows resulting in water quality changes and invasion of non-native species. In the Northern Everglades, changes are due to hydrologic alterations from a government-built drainage system and urban and agricultural development. Agency watershed activities have consisted of regulatory, best management practice programs and public investment in regional reservoirs, stormwater treatment areas and technologies. Field testing innovative approaches is essential to the identification of environmentally, socially, and financially effective program components. In 2005, the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project, a pioneering water services pilot, was initiated through a multi-stakeholder collaboration. This market-like environmental services approach proposed a program that would provide financial incentives to landowners for implementation of natural water management activities on portions of their ranches that cumulatively would lead to watershed-scale improvements. The implemented water management activities were providing water retention or nutrient reduction services. Market-like program development concepts include: (1) identify the environmental services and service buyers; (2) evaluate/document performance of the service activities; (3) streamline processes e.g., regulatory that are critical to participation; and (4) negotiate the terms and conditions of the payment for services contract including the service payment. After years of planning, design, testing and pilot implementation, managed through a multi-stakeholder process, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) in 2011 issued the first solicitation under its Dispersed Water Management – Northern Everglades Payment for Environmental Services (NE-PES) Program. NE-PES converted the theory of water services into an operational program. Utilizing a collaborative multi-stakeholder development approach offers the opportunity to build credibility and trust across landowners, agencies, and environmental groups. In addition, sources of funding are expanded because of the wide-spread support for the program. Payment for water services is being discussed statewide in relation to the Florida Wildlife Corridor.

PRESENTER BIO: Benita Whalen is the President of Dispersed Water, LLC and the Water and Environmental Manager of the Florida Cattlemen's Association. Her work focuses on the sustainability of ranchlands. She developed the Dispersed Water Management and Payment for Environmental Services Program during her tenure at the South Florida Water Management District.