

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WATER RESOURCE PROTECTION IN THE SUWANNEE RIVER BASINS: RESULTS FROM STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

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Water resource management programs in the Suwannee River Basin in Florida are aimed at addressing multiple challenges associated with water quality, availability, and use in the region. Stakeholder opinions are essential for developing regulatory and outreach strategies intended to meet water quality and restoration goals. This study summarizes the results of the focus group discussions and interviews conducted in the region. Three focus group discussions were held, each involving a different group of stakeholders: springs activists, springs users, and agency personnel. In addition, 18 interviews were conducted with agricultural producers, agency personnel, and outreach professionals. Discussion questions included personal experiences with the springs, perceptions of the current state of the springs, concerns about water issues, and the perceptions and attitudes towards current science, proposed solutions, and policies. The focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed and reviewed, thematic patterns in responses were analyzed, and the main categories of responses were identified. The coding of the main categories was completed using NVivo and MaxQDA qualitative data analysis software. Springs are experienced differently by the study participations, and the springs activities influenced the perception of the springs, especially among the frequent users and activists, most of whom were concerned among the springs conditions. Limited data and related lack of accountability, lack of enforcement, and the overall failure to work were some of the opinions expressed about the existing policies and programs intended to protect the springs. While disagreement was expressed about the threats facing the water resources in the region, a desire for more dialog was also observed.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Dr. Tatiana Borisova is an associate professor and statewide extension specialist (water economics and policy). Since she joined the University of Florida 10 years ago, she contributed to a variety of projects, including “Innovative Policies to Optimize Water Quality and Conservation Investments and Maximize Multiple Benefits”, which funded this study.