

## **WATER QUALITY SUMMIT: FROM ZERO TO 600 IN 3 MONTHS**

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Sarasota County experienced dramatic impacts from the 2018 red tide bloom. Businesses suffered, people experienced health impacts, and the associated marine species die-off became headline news around the world. Residents demanded action. The County Commission identified water quality as their highest priority issue and directed staff to design a summit to engage the community on the issue. Their goals were to: enhance community understanding; share the latest research and opportunities; and provide an opportunity for public engagement. A team of 15 staff members from 6 departments, led by UF/IFAS Extension, established a plan for the summit that included 24 speakers and 21 exhibitors from local and state organizations. The speakers were arranged into four panels that shared the most important water quality information on: the science; local action; what the community can do; and what state policy makers and agencies are doing on the issue. To maximize public engagement, several strategies were implemented before, during, and after the event. Over 600 people registered for the event and over thirty media contacts extended our reach beyond those who attended in person. Over 700 questions and comments were submitted, which were answered in detail, made public and given to the County Commissioners. Future education efforts are being informed by these results. Most importantly, the post-event survey indicated that over 84% of respondents plan to take action to protect local water quality.

The event set a common framework for understanding the complex issue of water quality, increased knowledge, planted seeds for future action, and increased engagement by individuals. It also provided the County Commission with a clearer picture of community priorities and legislative opportunities and will inform Extension programs going forward. This collaborative approach was successful at showcasing Extension's expertise, facilitation skills, and community programs to protect water quality.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Lee Hayes Byron is the County Extension Director for UF/IFAS Extension Sarasota County providing science-based education for our local community on issues ranging from nutrition and hurricane preparedness to energy, water quality, and landscaping. Previously she was the Sarasota County Sustainability Manager, overseeing sustainability improvements within government operations and community-wide.