

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE FLORIDA WELL OWNER NETWORK

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The Florida Well Owner Network (FWON) is a drinking water quality and septic system education program for residents being developed by UF/IFAS Extension agents and state specialists. Our goals are to educate residents about well water quality and best management practices to ensure well and groundwater protection, and to facilitate water testing.

Approximately 2.5 million Floridians rely on private wells for home consumption. While public water systems are monitored under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, private wells are not regulated. Well users control the management and protection of their wells, depending on education rather than regulation to ensure water quality standards are met. Limited public data exist on how many well users test their water or drink from contaminated wells. The state has identified septic systems as a potential source of both nitrogen and fecal coliform bacteria to impaired water bodies. Over 30% of Florida households use septic systems to treat household wastewater, and most private well users have septic systems. Raising awareness among residents about groundwater quality, pollutant sources and loads, and best practices to reduce loads is critical.

Since 2017, 1,231 residents have been educated about water quality and septic system maintenance through FWON and 421 people have had their well water tested for bacterial contamination. Due to COVID-19, we switched from in-person workshops to webinars, reaching approximately 500 well users in the last six months, but this has excluded rural audiences with poor internet connection. Major challenges also include funding and facilitating well water testing. Testing is expensive for residents and logistics to organize large sampling events and ship samples to labs for analysis is challenging. Moving forward, we are continuing to organize well education events both through webinars and in-person and are seeking funding and partnerships to facilitate and subsidize well water testing.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Dr. Zhuang is a Water Resources Regional Specialized Agent. Her Extension areas of specialization focus on integrated water resources management in agricultural and urban environments.