

## INFORMING SEPTIC TO SEWER CONVERSION OUTREACH IN FLORIDA THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED SOCIAL MARKETING

*Lisa Krimsky<sup>1</sup>, Laura Warner<sup>2</sup>, Shelli Rampold<sup>3</sup> and Ricky Telg<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>University of Florida IFAS Extension and Florida Sea Grant, Ft. Pierce, FL, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Florida IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Center for Land Use Efficiency, Gainesville, FL, USA

<sup>3</sup>The University of Tennessee Agricultural Leadership, Education and Communications, Knoxville, TN, USA

<sup>4</sup>The University of Florida Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources, Gainesville, FL, USA

Onsite sewage treatment and disposal systems, a.k.a. septic systems, are widely used in Florida. Conventional septic systems contribute an estimated 100 billion L/year of effluent which can be a contributor of nitrogen and phosphorus to groundwater sources. Septic to sewer conversion programs are being widely implemented across Florida as a means of reducing nutrient loading to impaired waterbodies. However, many of these programs are voluntary and success of conversion projects is dependent on community acceptance and an understanding the numerous barriers to conversion. This project utilized a community-based social marketing approach to develop more effective outreach strategies for local governments conducting septic to sewer conversions.

We conducted focus groups and public opinion surveys to determine perceived barriers, motivators, and other educational needs that may influence the willingness of Florida residents to convert from septic to sewer. This study compared three different counties with statewide residents to determine if Floridians have the same educational needs and beliefs or if the promotion, development, and dissemination of education and outreach materials for septic phase-out programs need to be tailored to specific communities. The results of our study indicate that while there are minor differences between communities, a statewide marketing plan for septic to sewer conversion projects can be used so long as it does not follow a one-size-fits-all approach. In general, attitudes regarding conversion were positive. Homeowners prioritized personal benefits to conversion including the reduction in maintenance burdens and increases in property values. Based on our results, outreach materials should not focus on environmental and water quality benefits. Instead, information should address homeowner priorities and provide information that will make the process easier. The barrier of upfront costs can be removed if they are dispersed over time. Alternative funding and fee structures should be considered to remove the primary external barrier to conversion.

**PRESENTER BIO:** Dr. Lisa Krimsky is a faculty member with the University of Florida IFAS Extension and Florida Sea Grant Program. Lisa is one of five Water Resource Regional Specialized Agents located across the state. Her extension efforts focus primarily on water quality and harmful algal blooms in coastal and estuarine ecosystems.