

Ranchers active in water storage program

By Pete Gawda
Okeechobee News

Another step was taken recently to help restore the Everglades.

Local ranchers, state officials and members of the news media gathered at Dixie Ranch, north of the City of Okeechobee on U.S. 98, on Tuesday, Nov. 29, for what Herschel Vineyard, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, called "an important next step in Everglades restoration."

The occasion was to introduce the public to the Dispersed Water Management Program. Eight ranchers in Okeechobee and surrounding counties are participating in this public-private agreement whereby South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) pays them to store water on their lands. The ranchers still have use of the land and pay taxes on it. In turn taxpayers get the benefit of improved water quality and flood control. Nutrients are removed from the water and excessive discharges to the estuaries are prevented. The cost is also less than if the state bought a large parcel of land and build a reservoir.

"We remain 100 percent committed to restoring the Everglades," said Mr. Vineyard. "Farming and ranching are part of Florida's rich history," he said. "They should be a part of Florida's bright future."

Melissa Meeker, SFWMD executive director, said that storing water on private land meets SFWMD goals and keeps ranches working. She said the ranchers bring the projects on line quicker.

The host was Woody Larson, owner of Dixie Ranch, one of the oldest ranches in the area. He said that in the days of the open range, cattle from the southern part of the county were gathered on the high ground of Dixie Ranch before being moved to the railroad at Okeechobee. "We know now that land and water are inseparable," Mr. Larson said. "The way we manage land determines how we manage water."

"The cattle industry is excited about this probate public partnership," said Dan Quincey, Jr., president of the Florida Cattlemen's Association and Chairman of the board of directors of the Suwanee River Water Management District. "It's a win-win for the whole state of Florida." He said the money spent on this program goes into the local economy.

After the speeches the eight landowners and state officials signed a document agreeing to the program and Mr. Larson gave the media a swamp buggy tour of the water storage areas on his ranch. He pointed out berms and water control structures that will be used to hold water on his property. He has 856 acre feet of water storage on his Dixie Ranch.

The other participants in the program are the Alderman-Delaney Ranch, Okeechobee County, 147 acre-feet, Buck Island Ranch, Highlands County, 1,573 acre-feet of water storage, Dixie West, Okeechobee County, 315 acre-feet, Lightsey Cattle Company, Highlands County, 887 acre-feet, Lost Oak Ranch, Polk County, 374 acre-feet, Triple A Ranch, Okeechobee County, 397 acre-feet, and Willaway Cattle and Sod, Okeechobee County, 229 acre-feet.

An acre foot is an acre of water 1 foot deep. The water storage areas are shallow,

varying from a few inches to about 2 feet.

One of the pilot projects used to develop the Dispersed Water Management Program was shown in a single year to have removed 8.4 metric tons of phosphorous to improve water quality in the Lake Okeechobee Watershed. Over \$7 million has been invested by SFWMD over the 10-year period of these eight contracts.

In total there are more than 100 participating partners in the Dispersed Water Management Program providing water retention or storage ranging from one acre-foot to 30,000 acre-feet. The ultimate goal of the program is to provide 450,000 acre-feet of retention/storage throughout the Northern Everglades watershed.



Okeechobee News/Pete Gawda

Melissa Meeker, left, executive director of South Florida Water Management District, addressed the crowd gathered at Dixie Ranch on Tuesday, Nov. 29, to recognize eight ranchers participating in the Dispersed Water Management Program. Woody Larson, center photo, owner of Dixie Ranch, welcomes state officials and members of the news media to his ranch. The occasion was to recognize Mr. Larson and seven other ranchers. Local rancher Chuck Syfrett, right, signs a document agreeing to participate in the Dispersed Water Management Program. In the background are other ranchers who are participating in the program waiting to sign the document.

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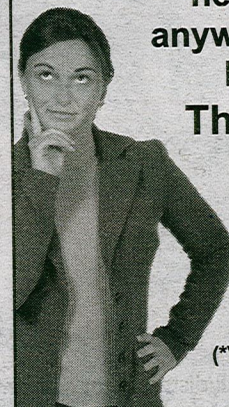
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