

**HILLSBOROUGH SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT**

**Board of Supervisors District Regular Meeting**

**Wednesday February 3, 2021**

**Florida Strawberry Growers Association**

**Meeting called to order at 4:45 PM by Chairman Michael Hepburn**

**Supervisors in attendance:**

Michael Hepburn, Chair  
Kathy Eckdahl, Vice-Chair  
Sonja Brookins, Supervisor

**Others in attendance:**

Betty Jo Tompkins, HSWCD, Executive Director  
Linda Chion, HSWCD Computer Graphics  
Stephanie Collins, HSWCD Community Outreach (Zoom)  
Jeff Whealton, SWFWMD Ag Team Manager  
Ken Griner, SWFWMD Project Engineer  
Simon Bolin, Agribusiness Development Manager  
Sheila McNamara, Hills. Co. Sustainability  
Walter Albarran, NRCS Area Conservationist (Zoom)  
Juan Hernandez, NRCS State Conservationist  
Kenneth Parker, FSGA Executive Director  
Matt Warren, FDACS Environmental Manager  
Matt Vinzant, SWFWMD Farms Program Project Manager  
Richard Darby, AFCD First Vice-President  
Roy Davis, past Chair HSWCD

**INTRODUCE MEMBER(S) OF THE PUBLIC**

Chair requested members and guests introduce themselves and offer public comment.

**MINUTES OF THE DECEMBER 9, 2020 REGULAR MEETING**

Vice-Chair Eckdahl moved approval of Dec 9, 2021 Board Meeting Minutes 2<sup>nd</sup> by Supervisor Jaroch.  
Motion passed unanimously.

**TREASURER'S REPORT**

Treasurer Andrew Brooks was not in attendance so reports held for next meeting.

**FARM SERVICE AGENCY REPORT**

Many years ago the government started reaching out to farmers, but they did not trust the government. So, they developed local Conservation Districts with the Federal Government. It is a complex relationship and while some districts are large, others are struggling.

Executive Director Tompkins commented that Hillsborough County agriculture is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest in the State in production value. She also reported that Hillsborough County ag ranks 119<sup>th</sup> out of over 3,000 counties in the United States.

#### Florida Strawberry Growers Association report

Kenneth Parker, Executive Director of the Florida Strawberry Growers Assn, reported that strawberries are the #1 crop in Hillsborough County. Strawberries are the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest value fruit or vegetable crop in Florida right behind Citrus. Eastern Hillsborough County strawberries represent a \$1 billion ag economic engine with agriculture being close to a \$3 billion economic engine countywide. Ag production in Hillsborough County generates approximately 26,000 jobs.

Agriculture sets the groundwork for being better stewards while still staying competitive. The strawberry industry was the first to adopt fertigation and in so doing cut water and fertilizer usage in half. Plant breeding programs make strawberries more marketable with less input and cost share programs assist. Parker expressed appreciation for NRCS stating they are a major asset.

Strawberry growers are tech savvy with 3 sites in Hillsborough County providing data such as evapotranspiration. The locations are Balm, Dover and on County Line Road. Those sites are utilized to predict water usage, eliminating grower's guesswork. These sites also utilize moisture meters, and on freeze nights the stations help monitor dew point for frost protection decisions.

#### Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Report

Matt Warren, FDACS Environmental Manager who had been attending via Zoom, had to leave meeting, so no report provided.

#### SWFMD Report

Jeff Whealton, SWFWMD Ag Team Manager said he and the Environmental Scientist are servicing six counties. Their job is to navigate site visits, help with water use permits and other tasks. Currently, there are two mobile irrigation labs. They have been talking to farmers about implementing farm plans to get them exemptions for ag permits. Whealton mentioned a You Tube video about this topic as well.

Dover water use is being reviewed. In 2010 due to 11 nights of freezing, the water drawdown likely caused sinkholes and other issues in the area. They are reviewing how the processes put into place afterwards are working out. There will be a report issued and provided to the Board.

Staffing is a major issue, with smaller staffs making it extremely difficult to cover current workloads.

#### Hillsborough County Agribusiness Development Report

Simon Bolin, Agribusiness Development Manager stated that Hillsborough is unique in agribusiness. We are the only county with an ag liaison staffed within the County in the Economic Development Department. Agriculture in Hillsborough has a \$3 billion impact. The Planning Commission will be holding a major meeting with topics such as wetland issues, environmental building plans and more.

No report given as Bronwyn Bethea-Rowland, FSA Farm Loan Manager was not in attendance.

#### NRCS District Area Report

Walter Albarran, NRCS Area Conservationist reported for new NRCS District Conservationist Leslie Diaz Executive Director Tompkins noted that the report is in the binders. Number of obligations competing for financial assistance. Nine of which are high priority. Allocations of \$14.7 million for general funding and \$5 million for other initiatives. Looking at close to \$20 million. Areas for financial assistance are cropland, grazing, brush and invasive species as well as high tunnels. Brush and invasive species work is important as it is difficult for livestock producers to compete against watering systems, so trying to assist producers is a priority. State Technical Committee Meeting is scheduled for March 3<sup>rd</sup> via computer or phone.

Executive Director Tompkins reported that she spoke to Diaz regarding Local Working Group meeting in May. FSGA has offered to be the host location. Local Work Group meeting dates must be established by the end of March and completed by May. Plans are underway.

Albarran expressed appreciation for Executive Director Tompkins and thanked her for her efforts.

#### NRCS State Report

Juan Hernandez, new State Conservationist, reported on Legislative tour in Hillsborough County where participants visited Driscoll Farms, a fish farm and Audubon Ranch. It was an excellent way to meet producers. Hernandez will be meeting with FSGA Executive Director Kenneth Parker again to develop better methods to work with the strawberry industry. Hernandez wants to reconnect with industries such as nurseries, Cattlemen's Association, and others that have seen a decline in activities.

Allocated dollars can be increased, and Florida should be receiving much more due to the amount of agriculture within the State. There is a need to position ourselves in order to compete on the national level. Hernandez stated that to compete better, contract implementation needs to be more effective. His key strategy is simplifying how we do business and gain efficiencies. Major issues include need for more employees and implementation to secure additional funding.

Every industry has its own challenges. Local Work Groups need to be productive and Hernandez wants to institutionalize when the Work Groups meet. All Local Work Group meetings around the State will be scheduled in May with 30 days' notice given.

Tompkins commented that Hillsborough's Local Work Group meets annually around the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> week of June, but will be rescheduled to conform to the May dates. An average of 30 – 40 people attend and the HSWCD LWG is one of the largest in attendance statewide.

Hernandez stated he was pleased to hear of HSWCD's success, but said meeting predictability is needed statewide. If the Districts do not conduct the Work Groups, NRCS will. They plan to collect the information from each Work Group for future funding assessment and other use. He requested Work Groups speak freely and noted the forest industry is another one he wants to engage.

Climate is major on the new administration's list. Waiting to see how this translates into what they do.

The Ag Economic Development Council will be meeting Tuesday, February 9<sup>th</sup>, to investigate how to economically make ag more robust. One area is hops research. Grants are being applied for to help fund hops research at IFAS. Research has been ongoing for 6 years. Florida is the only place in the world that hops can be harvested twice a year. Over a five-year period Florida has gone from 36 breweries to 320. This could potentially be a new crop for Hillsborough.

The Florida Veterans Agriculture Program has been successful. It is a 6-month paid internship with GREC. GI Bill funding is utilized for certification and education. After the internship is over, veterans are then placed for three months in an ag environment. Since the program's inception in 2016, 14 veterans participated and 100% received a job in the ag industry. This program is now statewide at the Mid Florida Research Station, Hardee Cattle Research Station and at a research station in North Florida. There is a \$750,000 grant for this program.

#### AFCD Report

Richard Darby, AFCD First Vice-President, began with a caution to the Board to make sure they understand Florida's Sunshine Laws. St John's County thought they could conduct their meetings via phone and were wrong. Zoom must be made available to the public. Darby reported that at the 2020 AFCD Annual Meeting the by-laws were revised and the state association areas were divided into six areas, from the four previous areas.

#### Non-Agenda Items

None given.

#### Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District Executive Director's Report

Executive Director Tompkins reported that currently the position for Administrative Services and MIL Technician have not been filled due to unable to find correct person.

The website is being updated twice monthly with new info. Linda Chion, HSWCD Computer Graphics, will be adding an interactive blog.

On the education side, the poster contest is extremely successful for the 2021 Healthy Forests, Healthy Communities theme. Charter schools have requested over 1,500 posters. HSWCD has discontinued advertising free posters as cost is becoming prohibitive. Every child who enters the poster contest receives a certificate with their poster printed on it, so even if they lose the poster, they have the certificate. Every poster will be displayed at the Hillsborough County Fair and each child who enters gets a free ticket to the County Fair. The entire staff is working on the poster contest, with Stephanie Collins, HSWCD Community Outreach Technician, visiting numerous schools.

Envirothon will be virtual this year and will not be held in many locations.

Ag Venture is on hold. Normally over 1,500 students attend thru fall. Land Judging is also pending.

Supervisor Sonja Brookins is scheduled to speak before the CROP group at Hillsborough Community College, Brandon Campus, on Saturday, February 6, 2021. Director Tompkins will also be presenting.

Tompkins reported that she will be a speaker at the National Association of Conservation Districts annual meeting on February 9<sup>th</sup> in the Communication Segment. Her 25-minute speech features Hillsborough 100 and Hillsborough Soil and Water Conservation District. The video was presented at the conclusion of the Board meeting. The Annual Meeting dates (all via zoom) were February 1 – 5 and resume February 8 – 10<sup>th</sup>.

Florida is the host for the NACD Convention, February 11 – 15, 2022, in Orlando. Tompkins hopes to schedule a tour of Hillsborough's strawberry operations and the Florida State Fair during that event as the dates fall during the Fair.

NACD Advocacy Week will be held March 22 – 26<sup>th</sup>.. Although this annual event is normally held in person, this year it will be conducted via zoom.

Discussion was held regarding the AFCD Area meetings. Board agreed that if a host county was needed for Area 4, Hillsborough would be willing to host.

HSWCD will participate in the 2021 Florida Strawberry Festival, March 4 – 14, with a complimentary booth in the Grimes Building.. Announcement not yet made regarding Farm Credit breakfast or luncheon. Exhibitors' dinner and media party have been canceled.

Florida State Fair has been rescheduled for April 22<sup>nd</sup> to May 2<sup>nd</sup>. HSWCD will have exhibit in the Ag Hall of Fame building and distribute materials.

Hillsborough 100 Conservation Challenge is April 17<sup>th</sup> thru May 9<sup>th</sup> and work is underway for programs, projects and activities. The tabloid will be distributed Sunday, April 18 in The Tampa Bay Times, April 22 in \*TBT and throughout the year at fairs and festivals.

Meeting adjourned.