

Marion Soil and Water Conservation District

Strategic Plan

2024–2028

Introduction

The Marion Soil and Water Conservation District (MSWCD) is committed to conserving natural resources, improving water quality, and promoting sustainable land use practices in Marion County, Florida. This Strategic Plan aligns with the District’s mission and long-term objectives, outlining actionable steps to achieve conservation goals while fostering community support through education, partnerships, and engagement over the next four (4) years.

Mission

To administer programs to conserve soil, improve water quality, and enhance water quantity in Marion County, Florida.

Vision

To promote the conservation, improvement, and sustainable management of our natural resources through outreach and educational programs.

Values

1. Learning - Expanding our collective understanding of natural resources and conservation practices.
 2. Stewardship - Leading initiatives to conserve natural resources and advocate for environmental awareness and responsible management.
 3. Community - Engaging and collaborating with our community and partners for collective growth.
 4. Support and Sustainability - Promoting best management practices (BMPs) and providing ongoing support for eco-friendly land use operations and implementations.
-

Strategic Focus Areas

To fulfill its mission, MSWCD has identified five strategic focus areas for 2024–2028:

1. Water Resource Conservation and Protection
2. Water Resource Awareness and Soil Health Practices
3. Community Outreach and Education
4. BMPs Education
5. Expand Media Educational Presence

Each focus area is supported by specific objectives and strategies to ensure measurable progress and long-term impact.

Goals and Objectives

Goal 1: Water Resource Conservation and Protection

Objective: Protect and enhance water resources through sustainable practices that conserve water, maintain quality, and increase quantity.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD staff, volunteers, and supervisors; Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS); United States Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA/NRCS); Marion County Board of County Commissioners (MCBCC); Water Management Districts (WMDs); residents.
- **Focus:** FDACS and WMD cost-share programs, NRCS initiatives through programs like Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly reviews to monitor progress and implement timely adjustments.

Key Actions:

- Promote participation in the Farms of Environmental Distinction (FED) Program, with a target of enrolling at least one (1) new conservation-focused individual annually.
- Direct producers, ranchers, and landowners to NRCS, FDACS, and WMD cost-share programs that address conservation stewardship. (Please note that the number of participants ultimately depends on the availability of funding and the number of applicants accepted by NRCS, FDACS, and WMDs each year.)
- Address stakeholders' inquiries on conservation programs.
- Hosting at least two (2) outreach events annually that focus on promoting conservation stewardship.

Outcomes:

- Increase adoption of conservation practices by stakeholders.
 - Community recognition of conservation leaders inducted into FED Program.
-

Goal 2: Water Resource Awareness and Soil Health Practices

Objective: Enhance awareness of water resource management and promote soil health through education and resource sharing.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD staff, volunteers, and supervisors; residents.
- **Focus:** Educational materials, soil testing services.
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly reviews to monitor progress and implement timely adjustments.

Key Actions:

- Educate sixty (60) residents on the importance of water and soil health through workshops and events by 2028.
- Direct fifteen (15) residents to soil testing services by 2028 to improve land management.
- Provide soil health information and distribute BMP-related literature at public events.
- Promote soil health through dissemination of literature at public events.

Outcomes:

- Improve understanding and effective implementation of soil health practices in Marion County by educating sixty (60) residents on water resources, directing fifteen (15) landowners to soil testing agencies, providing soil survey information to nine (9) stakeholders, and promoting soil health to sixty (60) residents by 2028.
 - Strengthen community engagement in resource conservation through targeted outreach efforts and participation in conservation initiatives.
-

Goal 3: Community Outreach and Education

Objective: Engage and educate residents of all ages through programs and events that emphasize conservation.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD staff, volunteers, and supervisors; schools, teachers, advisors, students; community leaders; partner agencies.
- **Focus:** Youth education programs (e.g., Envirothon, Poster Contest), promotional materials, school partnerships, and community events.
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly reviews to monitor progress and implement timely adjustments.

Key Actions:

- Reach at least a hundred (100) students annually through youth programs and contests in partnership with schools, community leaders, and partner agencies.
- Distribute conservation literature at nine (9) local events each year.
- Collaborate with three (3) neighboring county partners or Soil and Water Conservation Districts to boost participation in Envirothon and Land Judging contests.
- Host at least one (1) conservation event per year, addressing various conservation-related topics to promote community awareness and engagement while partnering with other community leaders or agencies.

Outcomes:

- Increase youth involvement in conservation initiatives.
 - Greater public awareness of conservation practices and principles.
 - Strengthen community participation and knowledge-sharing on conservation stewardship.
-

Goal 4: Conservation Stewardship Education

Objective: Encourage the adoption of BMPs among residents to safeguard and enhance natural resources.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD staff, volunteers, and supervisors; FDACS; NRCS; WMDs; residents.
- **Focus:** BMP manuals, cost-share programs, technical workshops.
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly reviews to monitor progress and implement timely adjustments.

Key Actions:

- Provide demonstrations, presentations, and informational booths to at least nine (9) community events.
- Collaborate with local, state, and federal agencies to identify and address resource concerns by holding an annual Local Working Group.
- Expand BMP education through partnerships that offer technical assistance and promotion of BMP resources.

Outcomes:

- Increase adoption of BMPs in Marion County.
 - Broaden knowledge of BMPs.
 - Strengthen collaboration between residents and conservation agencies.
-

Goal 5: Expand Media Educational Presence

Objective: Utilize all media and digital platforms to enhance conservation education and community engagement.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD staff, volunteers and supervisors.
- **Focus:** Media platforms, website updates, virtual event tools.
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with quarterly reviews to monitor progress and implement timely adjustments.

Key Actions:

- Launch a new media platform by the end of 2025.
- Post thirty-six (36) media updates promoting conservation topics and success stories by 2028.
- Present three (3) virtual demonstrations by 2028 to provide education on conservation practices and initiatives.
- Regularly update the MSWCD website with accurate and timely information, ensuring it remains a reliable resource for the community.

Outcomes:

- Improve community engagement through media outreach.
 - Increase active participation in MSWCD programs, events, and initiatives.
 - Greater reach through conservation education and resources for Marion County residents.
-

Goal 6: Professional Development and Training

Objective: Ensure that MSWCD personnel (staff, volunteers, board members) participate in ongoing professional development to enhance their knowledge of District business, conservation practices, leadership, and policy-related matters.

- **Contributions:** MSWCD personnel (staff, volunteers, board members).
- **Focus:** Training workshops, legislative updates, conservation summits, webinars, and leadership development programs.
- **Timeline:** Ongoing, with annual reviews to track participation and assess training impact.

Key Actions:

- Require all MSWCD personnel (staff, volunteers, board members) to attend at least one (1) relevant training, workshop, or conference per year that aligns with MSWCD's mission and strategic goals.

Outcomes:

- Increased expertise in District business, conservation strategies, policy, and community engagement.
 - Strengthened leadership and decision-making capabilities within MSWCD.
 - Enhanced ability to advocate for and implement conservation initiatives through informed participation in relevant trainings and discussions.
-

Key Partnerships

To achieve its goals, MSWCD will collaborate with various stakeholders, including:

- Marion County Board of County Commissioners (MCBCC)
 - Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS)
 - United States Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA/NRCS)
 - University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS)
 - St. Johns River Water Management District (SJWMD)
 - Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)
 - Marion County Public Schools (MCPS)
 - Public Education Foundation of Marion County (PEFMC)
 - Horse Farms Forever, Inc (HFF)
 - College of Central Florida (CF)
 - Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs)
 - Residents of Marion County
-

Monitoring and Evaluation

To ensure the success of this plan, MSWCD will:

- **Quarterly Reviews:** Track progress toward strategic goals and adjust as needed.
 - **Annual Reports:** Summarize achievements and challenges with updates on program implementation(s).
 - **Stakeholder Feedback:** Collect input from partners, residents, and community leaders to refine strategies.
-

Challenges and Opportunities

1. Regulations and Legislation

- **Challenge:** Recent Florida legislation could significantly impact SWCDs, while strict adherence to the Sunshine Law remains essential for transparency. Navigating these changes requires ongoing adaptation to maintain compliance and stability.
- **Opportunity:** These legislative activities present an opportunity for the MSWCD to engage proactively and educate stakeholders. By participating in discussions and advocating for the importance of SWCDs, we can help shape future mindsets in support of conservation efforts and sustainable resource management.

2. Resource Limitations

- **Challenge:** Limited funding and personnel (staff, volunteers, board members) can restrict the scope and impact of conservation initiatives.
- **Opportunity:** MSWCD can explore various funding opportunities, such as grants and external sources, to support initiatives. This is an opportunity for the MSWCD to be resourceful and advocate for the District despite limited funding.

3. Engagement of Stakeholders

- **Challenge:** Fostering consistent engagement from all residents and community partners in conservation initiatives can be a challenge, particularly since our efforts are not largely known by the stakeholders due to limited resources.
 - **Opportunity:** This presents an opportunity to establish local partnerships, provide citizens with greater awareness of MSWCD's role, and offer a local starting point for individuals to gain experience and volunteer hours necessary to launch their careers.
-

Conclusion

The MSWCD Strategic Plan (2024–2028) provides a clear roadmap for achieving meaningful conservation outcomes. By focusing on resource conservation, community engagement, and organizational excellence, MSWCD will continue to safeguard Marion County's natural resources for future generations.

Adopted this 10th day of March 2025 by majority vote:

MSWCD Board of Supervisors