



Floridians see growers as wise water users

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Congratulations, citrus growers of Florida. The public does not consider you water hogs. That's the takeaway from a recent University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) survey conducted by our Center for Public Issues Education.

That's a big deal. Just look at how the California almond farmer has been vilified in recent months as drought tightens its grip on the state and the governor imposes mandatory water-use reductions on its cities.

POSITIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Our survey didn't focus just on citrus. We gauged public attitudes toward agricultural water use generally. The point is, though, we really didn't know what to expect when we surveyed Floridians about farmers' use of water.

But the Farm Bureau wanted to know and helped finance the survey (with contributions from the Florida Dairy Farmers and the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services). The Farm Bureau risked exposing an inconvenient truth.

What we found should be heartening to growers: 88 percent of Floridians believe that farmers are concerned about water in their decision-making; 78 percent believe that sound principles seem to guide farmers' behavior when it comes to water use.

We at UF/IFAS like to think that the public perception of farmers' water use results at least in part from our research on how to decrease water use, reduce runoff and protect water quality. We also see the survey results as a hopeful sign that our efforts to tell the story of agriculture in Florida are taking hold in the public imagination. That's just my opinion, though.

The facts are that UF/IFAS will continue doing research that helps you become better stewards of the state's water resources.

NEW HIRES TO FOCUS ON WATER MANAGEMENT

The UF/IFAS Citrus Research and Education Center is currently hiring a research and Extension faculty member to specialize in citrus water and nutrient management. The goal is to help you use water even more efficiently, or as the position announcement says, "to develop and implement sustainable strategies that optimize water management for citrus production, conservation of water and water quality."

There's an opportunity here for the new faculty member to make an impact by developing regional water-use models that account for tree water requirements, irrigation scenarios and use of water for cold protection. The new expert could also forward our understanding of how to apply agricultural technologies to manage water and develop best management practices for water conservation.

We'll continue to demonstrate to all interested growers the Smartirrigation Citrus app (find it at <http://ifas.ufl.edu/mobile-apps/>) our agricultural engineers have devised for Apple and Android smartphones.

As a result of our success in the legislature this year, which your advocacy helped us achieve, we'll be hiring three water Extension specialists who will help deliver our research to your groves. One of those specialists is likely to be placed at our Mid-Florida Research and Education Center in Apopka, just up the road from Lake Alfred. You can bet that specialist will be working closely with Citrus Research and Education Center researchers.

There are big challenges, to be sure. But I'm encouraged Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam has identified water as one of the state's most pressing issues. I'm also encouraged that at least we're not swimming upstream against sentiment that agriculture doesn't use water wisely.

We hope the new water specialists and new citrus and nutrient management scientist will help you build an even stronger case by bringing you science that will allow you to become even stingier water users — and, of course, to reduce one of your largest expenses.

There's a potential revenue upside in the survey findings as well: 93 percent of respondents said they were likely to buy products made with best management practices. And 73 percent said they'd even pay more for those products. That's encouraging news as your production costs soar in the era of HLB.

Go to www.piecenter.com/2015/09/08/survey-public-positively-perceives-farmers-use-of-water to see the study. 🍊

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