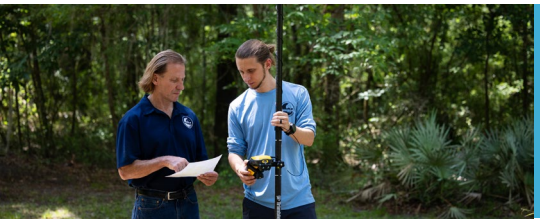
2025-2029 Strategic Plan

Suwannee River Water Management District

Introduction

The Suwannee River Water Management District (District), in accordance with section 373.036(2)(e)(4), Florida Statutes (F. S.), submits an annual strategic plan in lieu of the District Water Management Plan. The strategic plan outlines strategic priorities, goals, strategies, success indicators, funding sources, deliverables, and milestones for District functions. The plan casts a five-year outlook for the strategic priorities of water quality, water supply, flood protection, natural systems, and mission support.



Americans with Disabilities Act: The District does not discriminate upon the basis of any individual's disability status. This nondiscrimination policy involves every aspect of the District's functions including one's access to, participation, employment, or treatment in its programs or activities. Anyone requiring reasonable accommodation as provided for in the Americans with Disabilities Act should contact the District at 386.362.1001 or 800.226.1066 (Florida only).

Governing Board Members

Virginia H. Johns, Chair

Richard Schwab, Vice Chair

Charles Keith, Secretary/Treasurer

Harry Smith

Larry Sessions

Larry Thompson

William Lloyd

George Wheeler

Vision

Uniting the region in stewardship and awareness using innovative, science-based solutions to protect and restore our water resources.

Mission

To protect and manage water resources using science-based solutions to support natural systems and the needs of the public.

Agency Overview

The District is a regional governmental agency responsible for protecting and managing water resources in north-central Florida. The District is one of five water management districts created by the Florida Legislature with the passage of the Water Resources Act in 1972. A governing board consisting of up to nine members, each of whom live in the District, establishes District policies. Governing board members are unpaid volunteers appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Florida Senate for four-year terms.

While the District is the fifth largest of the five water management districts in geographic area, population served, tax base, and agency staff, it holds many of the most unique and valuable natural resources in Florida. The District encompasses 7,640 square miles in north-central Florida. The District includes all of Columbia, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Madison, Suwannee, Taylor and Union counties, and parts of Alachua, Baker, Bradford, Jefferson, Levy and Putnam counties. The District contains over 440 documented springs, including the highest concentration of freshwater springs in Florida, and the highest concentration of first-magnitude springs in the United States. Major rivers in the District include the Suwannee, Santa Fe, Withlacoochee, Aucilla, Alapaha, Ichetucknee, Fenholloway, Steinhatchee, Econfina, Waccasassa, and the Wacissa.

The District is charged by the Legislature with the responsibilities of managing water supply, water quality, flood protection, and natural systems. To meet these responsibilities and its mission, the District has developed goals for the next five years and identified the strategies necessary to accomplish these goals.

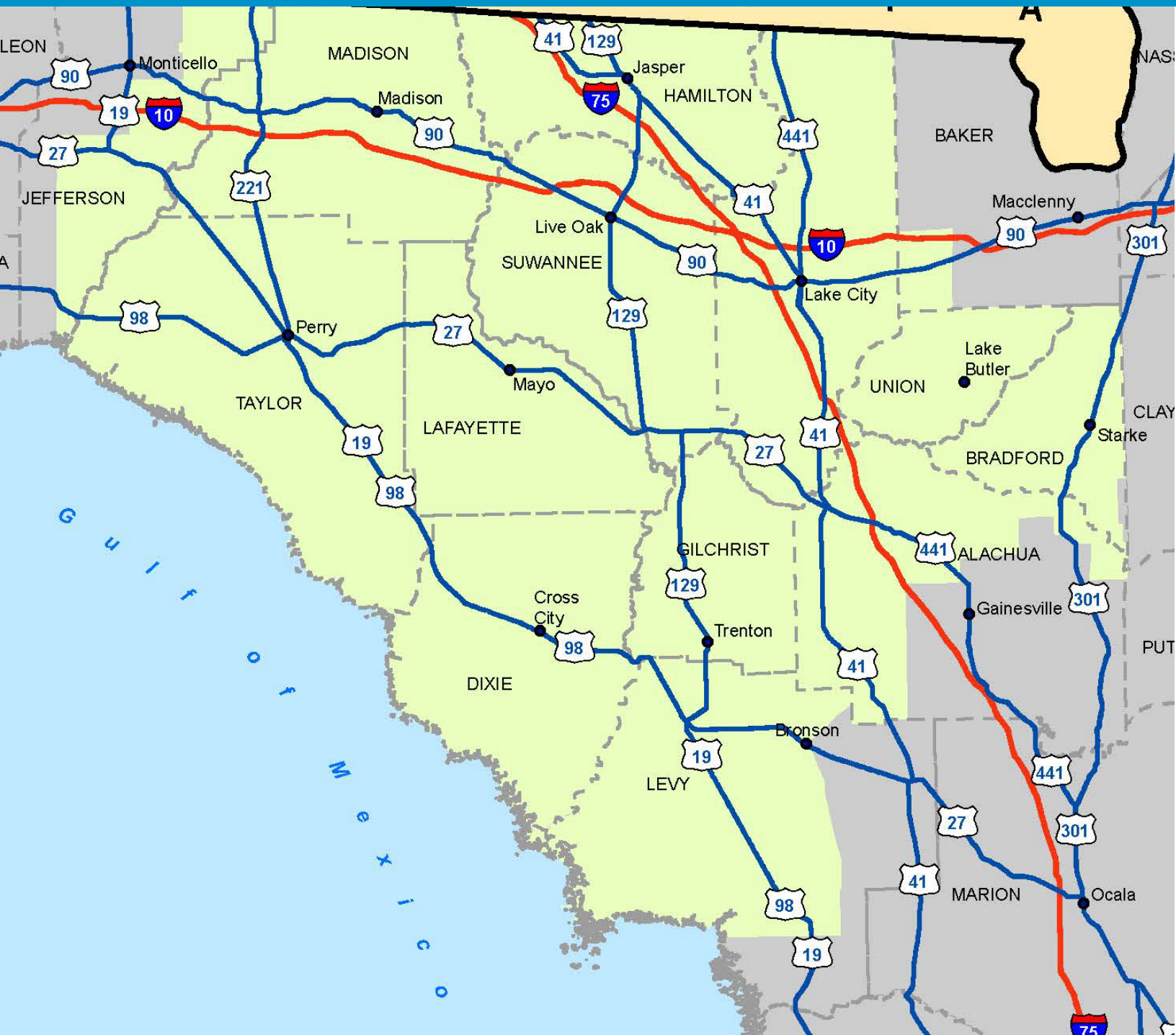
Funding

To carry out the mission and vision of this strategic plan, the District's budget is comprised of several funding sources. With the smallest tax base of the five water management districts, state legislative appropriations and state and federal grants are critical to accomplish our goals and mission. Grants from state and federal agencies, including the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the United State Geological Survey, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), support District programs and projects. Strong partnerships with local governments and stakeholders are also key to identifying funding opportunities. The District continues to work with its local, state, and federal partners to leverage the funding necessary to achieve the goals set out in this strategic plan.

Serving

NORTH CENTRAL FLORIDA

Since 1972



Water Quality

Water quality refers to the chemical, physical, and biological characteristics of water. Data shows persistent elevated nutrient levels, primarily nitrate, in rivers and springs throughout the District. Nitrate, in some instances, is the limiting nutrient that can cause imbalances in the ecosystem and impact the health of springs, rivers, and estuaries. Increased nutrient loads not only adversely impact the ecological health of rivers and springs but also the health of Gulf estuaries downstream.

To assist the FDEP in achieving Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) targets, the District partners with state agencies, local governments, landowners, and other stakeholders to implement projects to reduce nutrient loading, including implementing agricultural best management practices (BMPs), stormwater treatment, and erosion control and bank restoration. The District actively monitors nitrate concentrations throughout the District in both groundwater and surface water.

GOAL 1 - Support the Reduction of Nitrate Levels

Strategies

1. Implement the District water quality monitoring network to include routine and strategic sampling.
2. Develop project monitoring strategies to more accurately estimate or measure benefits.
3. Implement projects to assist in meeting BMAP nitrate load reduction targets.
4. Ensure permit and authorized projects meet statewide water quality criteria for erosion and sediment control.

GOAL 2- Protect Groundwater

Strategies

1. Coordinate permit reviews and projects with FDEP for aquifer recharge.
2. Collect and maintain high quality biologic and water quality data.
3. Inspect construction of wells for compliance with construction standards.

Success Indicators and Milestones for Water Quality

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the percentage of Outstanding Florida Springs that meet the state numeric nutrient criteria and the pounds of nitrate reduced by projects receiving District cost-share.

Water Supply

The District is responsible for managing water resources to ensure there is an adequate supply to satisfy all existing and projected reasonable and beneficial uses while sustaining water resources and protecting natural systems. In the District, over 90 percent of the water supply demands are met with fresh groundwater, virtually all from the Upper Floridan aquifer system. This region's ability to continue to grow and develop is therefore dependent on sustainably managing a growing demand for groundwater. Coordinated water use permitting, water resource planning, and water resource development projects are key to protecting and managing fresh groundwater supply.

GOAL - Sustainably Manage District Water Resources

Strategies

1. Identify water resource development projects to meet the prevention and recovery needs of established MFLs.
2. Update regional water supply assessments and plans.
3. Identify and implement feasibility and design studies necessary to evaluate projects.
4. Implement proven innovations and conservation for sustainable agriculture.
5. Maximize alternative water supply and reuse benefits in permitting and projects.
6. Prioritize efforts to achieve 10% or less unaccounted-for water losses for all public supply systems.
7. Engage with public utilities and other stakeholders regarding long-range and regional water supply planning.

Success Indicators and Milestones for Water Supply

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the amount of estimated water supply demand that can be met with projects identified in District water supply plans; and the year-to-year percentage of impact from groundwater use within the District on the aquifer.

Flood Protection

The District utilizes stakeholder engagement, agency partnerships, outreach, and permitting to share flood protection information and help reduce flooding impacts in the Suwannee River Valley. The District works with state and local governments to implement regional and local flood protection and flood control projects. The District also partners with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to update floodplain maps to help the public make informed decisions that reduce risk to life and property. Further, the District is the primary source of current flooding information for other agencies and the public, including real-time river levels and rainfall amounts, so that people can make well-informed decisions about flood protection and property at risk.

Goal One- Reduce and Mitigate Flooding Risks

Strategies

1. Prioritize naturally occurring recharge by increasing water storage through hydrologic restoration.
2. Support the development of floodplain mapping through community outreach.
3. Identify unmet flood protection needs and projects of local governments.
4. Increase public and stakeholder awareness of flood protection data, tools, permit requirements, and flood risk.

Goal Two – Prepare Communities for Sea Level Rise Impacts

1. Support vulnerability and risk assessment studies for coastal communities threatened by sea level rise (SLR).
2. Identify strategic District conservation easement and land acquisition opportunities.
3. Incorporate SLR impacts in Water Supply Plans and coastal MFLs.
4. Support interdistrict coordination efforts to address SLR.

Success Indicators and Milestones for Flood Control

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the percent of acreage of riverine floodplain under protection; funding of at least one flood control project each year; the acres of hydrologic restoration implemented and maintained, recharge benefits; the number of compliance cases addressed, and trainings provided.

Natural Systems

District projects, regulations, and land acquisition and management activities protect and restore the overall health of the ecological system. The District establishes minimum flows and minimum water levels (MFLs) for priority rivers, springs, and lakes to ensure there is an adequate supply of water to support natural systems. Through land acquisition and conservation easements, the District protects wetlands, floodplains, lakes, rivers, estuaries, and related resources. Land management strategies include prescribed fire to restore and enhance habitat and natural communities and, where appropriate, the promotion of sustainable forestry activities. ERP evaluations consider avoidance and minimization of impacts to wetlands and other natural systems.

Goal One -Establish Minimum Flows and Minimum Water Levels for Priority Water Bodies

Strategies

1. Implement the approved MFL priority list.
2. Conduct scheduled MFL water body status assessments.
3. Maintain the District monitoring network to establish/assess MFLs.
4. Evaluate and improve MFL methods and metrics for the evaluation of water resource values.
5. Develop recovery and prevention strategies as necessary to protect natural systems.

Goal Two- Steward District Lands to Balance the Needs of Natural Resources and People

Strategies

1. Manage District lands to achieve the highest natural resource value possible, leading the region in the quality of public lands.
2. Generate sustainable revenue streams while maximizing conservation efforts.
3. Implement and support the District Land Management Plan.
4. Develop operations and maintenance plans for District lands and projects to support the District's core missions.

Success Indicators and Milestones for Natural Systems

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the completion of MFLs for all remaining priority water bodies per the District schedule; and the quantity of water (MGD) achieved from conservation and water resource development projects under contract with the District. The success of the District's land acquisition and management goals and strategies will be determined by the number of acres acquired and disposed of; the number of acres acquired by the District that enhance aquifer recharge or flood protection; the number of acres of restored hydrology; and the number of acres of prescribed fire and invasive plant treatment.

Mission Support

Investing in and empowering District employees is critical to achieving the goals set out in this strategic plan. By combining employee development with operation efficiency improvements, helps to ensure staff have the tools and guidance to achieve District goals while streamlining workflows and retaining institutional knowledge.

Goal One - Reduce Risks Through the Management of Information and Data

Strategies

1. Collect and manage high-quality data to allow for data-driven, science-based decision making in water resource projects, flood hazard information, and water resource protection.
2. Reduce paper and place-bound information access by maximizing technological efficiencies, cloud-based file storage.
3. Maximize automated and linked systems to share and update information, reducing manual uploads and maintenance, thereby improving efficiency and reducing error.

Goal Two - Maintain Institutional Knowledge

Strategies

1. Document programmatic processes, identifying and addressing gaps and opportunities for improvement.
2. Retain employees through succession planning, mentoring, and professional development initiatives.

Goal Three - Strengthen Stakeholder Relationships and Partnerships

Strategies

1. Enhance confidence in the District through factual, transparent, and consistent engagements with internal and external stakeholders.
2. Increase public awareness of District core missions.

Success Indicators and Milestones for Mission Support

The District will measure progress towards the completion of individual and programmatic tasks contained within the aforementioned goals and strategies by tracking the completion of the planning, funding, construction, or implementation phases of the tasks and strategies. In addition, success will be measured by the number of professional certifications, graduate degrees, and leaderships positions within professional organizations held by its staff; the District's administrative overhead; the percentage of the District's budget utilized for projects that benefit water quality and water quantity; the percentage of the District's budget that is recurring but not funded with recurring revenues; and the percentage of facility repairs identified in the last 10-year facility inspection report that have been addressed.

Critical Wetlands Inventory Analysis

On April 27, 2022, Senate Bill 882 was signed into law which requires water management districts to include a critical wetlands inventory analysis list (CWIA) in its strategic plan. The list must be approved by the Governing Board and consider a list of criteria outlined in 373.036, Florida Statutes. Additionally, prior to inclusion on the list, landowners must be notified and given the option to be removed from the list.

Each governing board, in cooperation with local governments, shall develop a list of critical wetlands to be acquired using funds from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund.

- *The governing boards shall consider all of the following criteria in designating a wetland for inclusion on the list:*
- *The ecological value of the wetland, as determined by the physical and biological components of the environmental system.*
- *The effect of the wetland on water quality and flood mitigation.*
- *The ecosystem restoration value of the wetland.*
- *The inherent susceptibility of the wetland to development due to its geographical location or natural aesthetics*

Before adopting or amending its list of critical wetlands, each governing board must notify the owner of any property that the district contemplates including on the list. At any time, an owner who wishes to have his or her property removed from the list must submit by certified mail to the district a letter requesting such removal. The letter must indicate that the owner wishes for his or her property to be removed from the list and must sufficiently identify such property to the governing board. The governing board shall approve a removal request that meets the requirements of this subparagraph at its next regularly scheduled meeting.

The District does not plan to seek funding for critical wetlands from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund in Fiscal Year 2025 and therefore, did not include a list of critical wetlands in the FY 2025 Strategic Plan. Further, staff are updating the District's 5-year land acquisition workplan in FY2025 and plan to prioritize wetland properties from that list to be included in the FY2026 strategic plan.