

2025 Handbook of Florida Water Regulation: Agricultural Best Management Practices¹

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Preface

This handbook is designed to provide an accurate, current, and authoritative summary of the principal federal and state (Florida) laws that directly or indirectly relate to agriculture. This handbook provides a basic overview of the many rights and responsibilities that farmers and farmland owners have under federal and state laws and the appropriate contact information to obtain more detailed information. However, the reader should be aware that because the laws, administrative rulings, and court decisions on which this handbook is based are subject to constant revision, portions of this publication could become outdated at any time. Several details of cited laws are also left out due to space limitations. This handbook is an educational text for those interested in water use and water resource issues in Florida.

This handbook is distributed with the understanding that the authors are not engaged in rendering legal or other professional advice, and the information contained herein should not be regarded as a substitute for professional advice. This handbook is not all inclusive in providing information to achieve compliance with the federal and state laws and regulations governing water protection. For these reasons, the use of these materials by any person constitutes an agreement to hold harmless the authors, the UF/IFAS Center for Agricultural and Natural Resource Law, UF/IFAS Extension for any liability claims, damages, or expenses that any person may incur as a result of reference to or reliance on the information contained in this handbook. Note: UF/IFAS is the acronym for University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

Agricultural BMP Overview

Agricultural producers interested in stewardship activities that protect natural resources and may enhance production, as well as those seeking to reduce exposure to unwanted penalties and liabilities associated with impacts to water resources, are encouraged to adopt agricultural best management practices (BMPs).

While agencies may offer slightly different definitions, BMPs generally refer to management and cultural

practices that are intended to help agricultural producers to get the most beneficial use out of their land while preserving and protecting regional water resources. These practices are identified through research and field testing as effective and practicable methods. BMPs can help producers achieve agricultural production and water conservation goals while reducing or preventing pollution loading to surface and groundwater.

Examples of BMPs include nutrient management practices, irrigation management practices, and water resource protection practices, which producers can adopt to reduce the amount of fertilizers, animal waste, and other pollutants entering the water resources. BMPs change with the emergence of new technologies, making it important to regularly interact with the local UF/IFAS Extension Office (<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/>), Florida Soil and Water Conservation District (<https://www.afcd.us/>), Florida Farm Bureau (<https://floridafarmbureau.org/>), and regional and state agencies (see sections below).

Several regional, state, and federal agencies offer programs to assist agricultural producers with BMP information and implementation. Participation in these programs is voluntary; however, agricultural producers located within basin management action plan (“BMAP”) areas must either enroll in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) BMP program and properly implement applicable BMPs or conduct water-quality monitoring as prescribed by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) or the water management district to demonstrate compliance with state water quality standards. Agencies can offer cost-share funding and technical assistance to support agricultural producers in designing and implementing BMPs.

FDACS Agricultural BMP Programs

To address water quality issues, The Office of Agricultural Water Policy (OAWP) of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) is actively involved in the development of BMP manuals for specific agricultural commodities, with BMPs addressing both water quality and water conservation. The FDACS BMP

manuals for different agricultural operations are available at the FDACS website (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Agriculture-Industry/Water/Agricultural-Best-Management-Practices>).

To enroll in the FDACS BMP program, locate and contact your OAWP representatives for assistance in determining which BMPs are applicable to your operation. FDACS OAWP representatives will work with producers to identify applicable BMPs and document them on the Notice of Intent (NOI) to Implement BMPs and BMP Checklist. Next, OAWP representatives will provide a BMP checklist and NOI form for signature. Once the producer signs and submits the completed NOI and BMP Checklist, FDACS will review the information for completeness and enroll the operation in the BMP Program. Producers must properly implement all applicable BMPs as soon as practicable, but no later than 18 months after completion and execution of the NOI and associated BMP Checklist. Agricultural producers need to keep a copy of the checklist and signed NOI, implement and maintain the applicable BMPs, and retain the required records.

Enrollment in the FDACS BMP program provides producers a presumption of compliance with state water quality standards. Enrollment into the program also makes producers eligible for cost-share program.

The Implementation Verification program under the Clean Waterways Act of 2020 requires FDACS to conduct implementation verification visits to enrolled parcels every two years. To demonstrate that BMPs are implemented properly, farmers are required to provide FDACS records related to nitrogen and phosphorus applications. On the regional level, FDEP requires summaries of BMAP area records. For more information on the implementation verification process, refer to guidance provided by FDACS (<https://www.fdacs.gov/Agriculture-Industry/Water/Agricultural-Best-Management-Practices>).

You can contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office to get more information and assistance (<https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/find-your-local-office/>).

FDEP Agricultural BMAPs and BMPs

The FDACS agricultural BMP program is linked with state water quality policies. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) is leading the development of plans to restore water quality in rivers, lakes, and estuaries referred to as Basin Management Action Plans (BMAP). Simply put, these plans are plans of action to reduce pollution loading and meet the total limit on pollution (defined as Total Maximum Daily Load [TMDL]). When FDEP adopts BMAPs that include agriculture practices, producers must either implement

FDACS-adopted BMPs or conduct monitoring programs (prescribed by FDEP or the regional Water Management District) to show they are not violating water-quality standards. In contrast, implementation of BMPs can give producers the presumption of compliance with state water quality standards and eligibility for cost-share funding.

For more information on BMAPs, see <https://floridadep.gov/dear/water-quality-restoration/content/basin-management-action-plans-bmaps>.

NRCS Agricultural BMP Programs

Among the programs authorized by the federal Farm Bill and administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), provide assistance to producers and landowners with practices that help improve and protect water quality and quantity. The practices include activities that conserve natural resources while improving agricultural productivity, as well as wetland restoration practices and temporal or permanent land retirement. These voluntary programs include the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). To find your local NRCS office and learn more about the programs available in your area, visit <https://www.farmers.gov/working-with-us/service-center-locator>.

To find out more about the Farm Bill (also referred to as the Agricultural Improvement Act), see the following resources:

- USDA Economic Research Service. Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018: Highlights and Implications. <https://www.ers.usda.gov/agriculture-improvement-act-of-2018-highlights-and-implications/>
- Mylavarapu, R., Hines, K., and T. Borisova. 2017. Cost Share Programs for Florida's Agricultural Producers and Landowners. UF/IFAS EDIS Publication #SL264 (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/SS485>).

The complete text of 2018 Farm Bill can be found at <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr2/BILLS-115hr2enr.pdf>.

FWMD Agricultural BMP Programs

Florida's five Water Management Districts (FWMDs) offer funding support for agricultural producers to improve water use efficiency and protect the quality of surface and groundwater. Participation in the programs is voluntary. If funding support for agricultural BMPs is provided by the FWMDs, the districts may require revising consumptive water use permits (i.e., permits allowing producers to

withdraw water for irrigation). To find the FWMD that covers your area, see <https://floridadep.gov/owper/water-policy/content/water-management-districts>.

An example of an available cost-share program is the Facilitating Agricultural Resource Management Systems (FARMS) program in the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SFWMD). The FARMS program is a cost-share reimbursement program to promote surface water and groundwater resource sustainability for projects that promote tailwater recovery and/or surface water use, while reducing groundwater withdrawals. For more information on the FARMS program and how to qualify for funding from this and other FWMD programs, please see the following links:

- Northwest Florida WMD: <http://www.nfwwater.com/Water-Resources/Funding-Programs>
- Suwannee River WMD: <https://www.mysuwanneeriver.com/366/Agricultural-Cost-Share-Program>
- St. Johns River WMD: <http://www.sjrwmd.com/funding/>

- Southwest Florida WMD's Facilitated Agricultural Resource Management Systems (FARMS) program: <https://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/business/agriculture/farms-programs>
- Southwest Florida WMD's Mini-FARMS program: <https://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/business/agriculture/mini-farms>
- South Florida WMD's cooperative funding program: <https://www.sfwmd.gov/doing-business-with-us/coop-funding>
- South Florida WMD's Dispersed Water Management/Water Farming program: <https://www.sfwmd.gov/our-work/water-storage-strategies>

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