

MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Florida Legislature
FROM: Association of Florida Conservation Districts
SUBJECT: Senate Bill 1078 / House Bill 783 – Abolishing Soil and Water Conservation Districts
DATE: January 10, 2022

Background

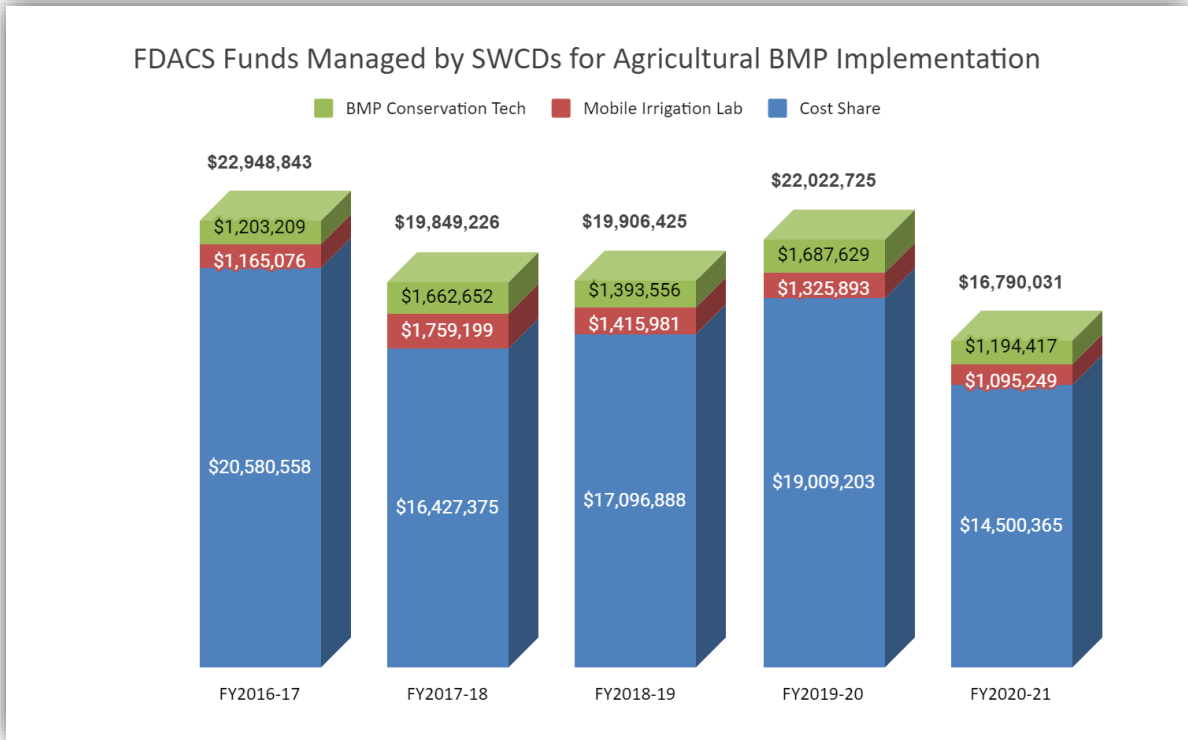
Florida's Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) are unique volunteers who serve as a voice to identify local resource concerns in 58 districts statewide. Supervisors must be elected but receive **no** salary or benefits for their service. A significant part of SWCD responsibilities in the state involve partnerships with local, state, and federal agencies to distribute funds earmarked for specific purposes to assist with conservation and agricultural efforts. These are pass-through funds that would not be available to the State of Florida, should SWCDs be abolished.

SWCDs have no regulatory authority or taxing powers. Funding for the work of the SWCDs comes from different sources dependent on the individual SWCD. Some include: grant administration fees, the sale and rental of agricultural equipment, cooperative agreements with Federal and State agencies, auctions, and sales of plants, trees and other items. A few SWCDs receive direct support from the counties where they are located.

Partner agencies include the Office of Agricultural Water Policy (OAWP) of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS), Water Management Districts (WMD), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) as well as local government entities.

OAWP, FDACS and Florida's Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Districts work with FDACS to help incentivize producers to adopt and comply with Best Management Practices, assist with the implementation of cost-share programs and help address irrigation and water quality issues. See the graph below for breakdown of these programs and their funding.

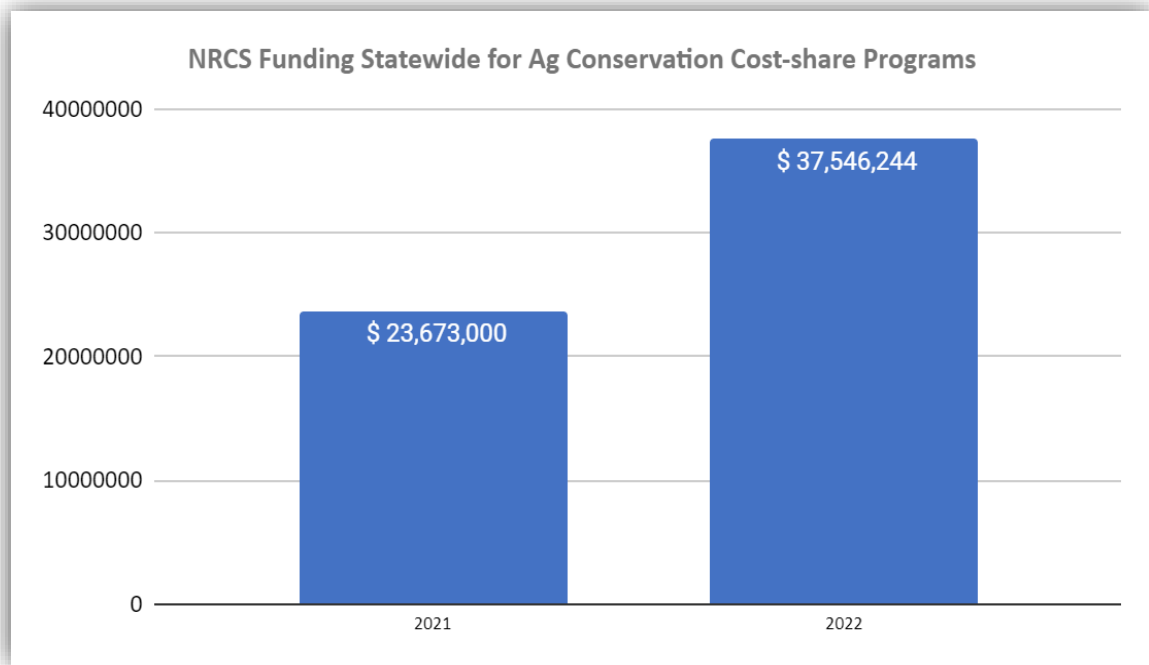


SWCDs play an important role in ensuring funds are distributed appropriately and within the bounds of grant and funding requirements. The FDACS funds managed by the Soil & Water Conservation Districts generate less than 5% in administrative fees for the services provided.

NRCS and Florida’s Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Local Working Groups (LWG) are coordinated by AFCD and led by the SWCDs to inform NRCS of local natural resource priorities. NRCS uses the information gathered to tailor funding to the needs of specific areas of the state. This ensures *local control* of federal dollars so that programs and projects most beneficial to local conservation needs in Florida are prioritized.

NRCS funding statewide for agricultural conservation cost-share programs (EQIP and CSP) is below. See chart below.



Other ways NRCS and SWCDs partner:

- Memorandum of Agreements (MOAs): 32 active
- Cooperative/Contribution Agreements
- Conservation Reserve Program:
 - AFCD is in the process of hiring a Conservation Reserve Program specialist to assist NRCS and the Farm Service Agency to implement the program.
- RESTORE Coordinator:
 - AFCD has hired a Coordinator that works closely with the SWCDs and local partners to implement the Gulf Coast Restoration Trust fund (RESTORE) activities for NRCS in Florida.

SWCDs in the Community

Beyond program and grants administration, SWCDs are active educators in their respective communities. Everything from conservation education to responsible water management of lawns are shared and communicated through a host of programs, contests and events around the state. SWCDs sponsor school and community gardens, photo and poster contests, and table local fairs and festivals throughout the state. Information about upcoming and past events can be found on the AFCD website at: <https://afcd.us/poster-contest/>.

Conclusion

SWCDs wear many hats and depending on the local needs and priorities of the individual districts, may focus efforts on irrigation improvements, water management practices, cost-share programs, environmental and conservation concerns, improving access to fresh food, educational programs and/or urban/suburban farming. There are nearly 3,000 SWCDs throughout the nation. Should Florida vote to abolish theirs, they would be the **only** state in the nation to do so.