FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Katelyn Potter, Communications Director
Suwannee River Water Management District
386.362.1001 or 800.226.1066 (FL)
SRWMDCommunications@SRWMD.org
www.mysuwanneeriver.com

SUWANNEE VALLEY IS LEADING THE WAY IN WATER-SAVING SCIENCE

Ben Broughton, farm manager at the North Florida Research and Education Center in Live Oak shows off a soil moisture probe being used to research irrigation practices on a variety of crops.

LIVE OAK, FLA., July 10, 2018 – Water is being saved by the millions of gallons across the Suwannee Valley, thanks to a partnership program with the Suwannee River Water Management District (District) and area farmers. The program helps farmers to implement water-saving devices known as soil moisture sensors throughout their farming operations by sharing the cost of the technology, known as cost share.

"Part of managing our water resources is working with our water users to identify innovative practices to efficiently use water without negatively impacting their businesses" said Hugh Thomas, executive director for the District. "This project is a win-win, all the way around. Most farmers are able to reduce their amount of groundwater pumping by using these water management tools."

Across the District, the sensors (also known as probes) are saving an average of 6,000,000 gallons of water per day. That equates to a savings of 151,000 gallons per acre (or the water in eight swimming pools) over a growing season for crops like watermelons, peanuts, and corn.

The sensors save water by helping farmers to adjust their irrigation schedules based on real time data provided by the probes. The devices send out very small electrical pulses and calculate the time it takes for the pulses to return to the probe to determine the amount of water in the soil. The pulses are emitted at various depths which allows farmers to know how the water is being taken up by a crop's root zone. If water flows past the root zone and is not utilized, the farmer can tailor his or her irrigation schedule to use less water and take full advantage of rainfall.

Water resource stakeholders across the region are highly supportive of the use of soil moisture probes and the District's program. University of Florida researchers are studying the effectiveness of the sensors on a variety of crops and crop rotations common to farmers throughout the Suwannee Valley.

"Soil moisture sensors are one of the best tools we have to aid our farmers and provide quick, easy management information. Not only do they provide soil moisture information but they can also show if a plant is stressed or possibly diseased," said Charles Barrett, water resources specialized agent with the University of Florida, North Florida Research and Education Center, Suwannee Valley. "It's like having your own personal record keeper on call, 24-7."

Farmers in the Suwannee Valley are leading the way across Florida in this specific type of water conservation practice – and the technology is expected to continue to grow.

Since January 2017, the District has helped fund 228 sensors throughout the 15-county District area, covering 14,500 irrigated acres. The program allows farmers to purchase the sensors at a significantly reduced cost to get the technology into their hands faster. Prior to 2017, the Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services provided grant funding for the sensors from 2015-2017.

"We expect to see a steady climb in the use of soil moisture sensors in the District over the next several years as the technology continues to improve, usability increases and cost continues to decrease," said Justin Garland, engineer with the District.

Once installed, only the head of the probe is exposed. Information is transmitted through cellular signals to the farmer.

In addition to water savings, the sensors also protect water quality by reducing the leaching of fertilizer through the crop's root zone. When farmers know how much water is available in the crop's root zone they can plan to have more water storage capacity in their fields to better protect against a leaching rain event.

"By managing the amount of water applied to crops, farmers can hold nutrients in the root zone longer which allows the plant a longer time to utilize the nutrients. This reduces the amount of fertilizer leached and supports the farmers bottom line," said Garland.

In areas of the District where targeted water quality efforts are ongoing, known as Basin Management Action Plan areas, the District will fund 90% of the cost of each probe. Elsewhere, the District funds 75% of the cost. The probes cost an average of $2,000 each and include a yearly service fee to support the technology. The District helps to offset the annual service cost as well.

"Currently, there is no better technology on the market for managing irrigation and water conservation than the soil moisture sensors," said Thomas. "Our goal is get at least one sensor on every farm in the Suwannee Valley within the next few years; and with our cost-share program there is no reason for a farmer with irrigation not to participate."

Older versions of irrigation management tools used tensiometers which were not very dependable in the sandy soil across the Suwannee Valley. The newer probes were introduced about four years ago and are significantly more reliable.

Registration for the soil moisture sensor program at the District is on-going. If you would like more information, contact the District's Ag Team at 386.362.1001 or visit www.mysuwanneeriver.com.

The mission of the Suwannee River Water Management District is to protect and manage water resources using science-based solutions to support natural systems and the needs of the public. The District holds true to the belief of water for nature, water for people. Headquartered in Live Oak, Florida, the District serves 15 surrounding north-central Florida counties.

For more information about the District, visit www.mysuwanneeriver.com or follow us on Facebook and Twitter, search @SRWMD.

###