

Best Management Practices “Benefits to Participating Growers”

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) has produced a number of Best Management Practices (BMPs) for water conservation and water quality that offer agriculture certain protections under state law. BMPs are defined as a practice or combination of practices based on research, field-testing, and expert review, to be the most effective and practicable on-location means, including economic and technological considerations, for improving water quality in agricultural and urban discharges. These practices when implemented are deemed to have a minimum individual or cumulative adverse impact to the water resources of the state. The program is incentive-based as Florida farmers who choose to implement BMPs adopted by rule receive a presumption of compliance with state water quality standards and are qualified to receive cost-share assistance from FDACS. The more tangible benefits to farmers who are involved in the BMP program are described in further detail below.

The first benefit deals with water quality under the state’s Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) program. Under state law, farmers implementing adopted BMPs are presumed to be in compliance with state water quality standards. This prevents them from having to monitor their water quality discharge at the edge of their field. This is very important given the costs associated with sample collection, laboratory analysis, and potential monetary fines should the agricultural discharge exceed published state water quality standards. There is another aspect to water quality and it involves something referred to as “BMP Participation Rates”. Instead of receiving strict TMDL allocations similar to a point source (plant) discharge would, Florida growers are instead given the opportunity to meet BMP participation rate goals. This requires that all growers within an affected basin work together to implement BMPs to the best of their ability in order to satisfy this requirement. Participation rates are simply a ratio of enrolled acreage compared to total agricultural acreage within a basin.

The second benefit deals with cost-share assistance. FDACS has successfully assembled a number of BMP cost-share reimbursement programs at various production locations around the state. In most cases, FDACS has contracted with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts in order to use them as the “delivery agent”. Qualifying farmers who have filed a Notice of Intent with FDACS as their pledge to implement BMPs are entitled to receive cost-share assistance. Reimbursement rates can be as high as 75%. This is a powerful monetary incentive, as some BMPs are very costly to install.

The last benefit is less tangible, but no less important. Farmers who implement adopted BMPs may be relieved from other regulatory requirements associated with certain water management district permits. Furthermore, farmers are also afforded other protections under the “Florida Right to Farm” Act.