

St. Johns River Water Management District Agricultural Success Story – Tater Farms



Eric Hjort, the General Manager of Tater Farms in Hastings, Florida, is a walking case study in how to move Florida agriculture through the water-use and economic challenges of the next 50 years. Along with owner Polly Johns, Eric has taken the approach that you can't stand still or do what you've always done and hope to survive, much less grow your business, in the water-use and water-quality environment surrounding agriculture in the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD).

Located in the Tri-County Agricultural Area (TCAA), Tater Farms is currently a year-round grower of several varieties of improved turfgrasses (e.g. St. Augustine, Bermuda and Zoysia) along with Bahiagrass, and is now one of the most successful turfgrass operations in Florida. Tater Farm's capacity for innovation on water use has been a core element of their successful approach to farming and has been a part of their "farm culture" as the operation has evolved from its roots in growing potatoes. Their approach is that no cultural practice is off limits in the exploration of doing things better or smarter, particularly if there is a natural resource benefit. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Turfgrass Producers of Florida (the principal trade organization of Florida's turfgrass producers) and of the Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, Eric knows the ever-present and ever-shifting challenges associated with farming in Florida and has been involved at a leadership level for many years.

The opportunity to consider agricultural cost-share programs offered through SJRWMD, and by the TCAA Water Management Partnership between SJRWMD, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) came in 2010. The programs focused on funding practices to reduce water consumption and decrease nutrient migration to natural water systems. While implementing new systems meant potential risks for the farmer, Eric and TTF understood they had to have “skin in the game”. Since participating in the cost-share programs, TTF has implemented several new systems, including installing 80-acres of subirrigation, and a 150-acre center pivot system for its turfgrass operations.



Water savings resulting from these systems has regularly exceeded 30% over traditional seepage irrigation, with the additional benefit of better drainage control with the drain tile systems. While there were initial concerns about the possibility of increased nutrient runoff with subirrigation, monitoring has indicated a reduction in nitrogen of 35% and in phosphorus of 90% in downstream surface waters. TTF has also embraced fertilizer distribution technology and precision spreaders, which apply fertilizer to root zones and prevent broadcast applications to furrows and nonproductive areas, further reducing nutrient use and operating costs on the

farm.

Eric has worked hard to ensure that the cost-share programs provide practical points of entry for all commodities and growers in the District and TCAA. For their part, the SJRWMD, FDACS and FDEP have demonstrated their consistent commitment to recognizing the importance of working with the agriculture industry, and its role in the finding solutions necessary for improving and sustaining the health of the region’s natural resources.