

OPINION: Farmers are supporting conservation efforts

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GUEST

Alan Jones

As a farmer, conservation is inherent in our work. Our role is more than just feeding families across the nation. It is making sure we grow our crops in an environmentally conscious manner. Our role is doing more with less so we may help the land to flourish.

My family started Jones Potato Farm back in 1986. My father and I started raising everything from purples, yellows, reds and chip potatoes. Today our family farm also cultivates green beans and citrus, and we also raise cattle.

We need to use adequate nutrients, healthy soil and clean water to grow successful crops year after year. Essentially, the nutrients our crops utilize for production are the same nutrients that we, as humans, utilize for our food source. That is why we are committed to protecting our water, wildlife and other natural resources through conservation efforts. It is the circle of a healthy, whole life cycle.

On our potato farm I have witnessed the benefits that agriculture can provide to our land. Preserving Florida's land and maintaining its health and beauty is how we are able to make a living and feed our communities.

We utilize Best Management Practices to conserve water and improve overall water quality. Best Management Practices are economically viable and technologically feasible measures based on sound science and developed by the state. They include on-farm erosion controls, precision fertilizer application and stormwater management.

But a farmer's participation in Best Management Practices is one part of the multifaceted solution. In addition to these practices we use GPS precision agricultural practices, which have reduced our fertilizer use by 30%.



In cooperation with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, we have also implemented water management strategies to lessen water use and minimize irrigation runoff to nearby lakes, rivers and streams.

In fact, during our first year of using low-volume center pivot irrigation, we saved 70% of our water use. This practice helps us conserve more than 1 million gallons of water daily. And that's just on our farm.

Farmers are doing our part. Unfortunately, most our work is misconstrued by many uneducated and uninformed individuals who have never set foot on a farm or attempted to grow a crop.

By partnering with other organizations – including the University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences and water management districts – farmers work to measure progress, develop solutions and define data-driven tactics to effectively treat and care for their land and our natural resources.

Thankfully, good change is here – it is happening. But immediate success doesn't happen overnight; it takes time, money and great effort for nature to replenish and fortify itself.

Our commitment as stewards of the land is a lifetime covenant. We work with and within Florida's fertile land every day. It is part of our livelihood to preserve our natural resources, wildlife and land.

Without it, we cannot produce or harvest crops. We cannot feed the mouths of the hungry. We cannot support our communities or Florida's economy. We cannot protect the lands from development.

Most importantly, we cannot preserve it for our future generations.

Water quality touches all Floridians. We all have a role to play in its protection. We need the support of Floridians and our Legislature to expand access and investments beyond Best Management Practices to protect our natural resources.

So the next time you think about water quality, think about what you are doing to make a difference in protecting our water resources for the future.

Alan Jones is a potato farmer in Manatee County and the owner of Jones Potato Farm in Parrish.