

County Situation:

Situated in the Florida Heartland, Highlands County is home to 103,296 residents, 1.6% (1,638) of which are agricultural producers. Many other county residents are employed in production agriculture or by companies who provide products or services to the agricultural industry. Over half of the 650,880 acres (1017 square miles) in Highlands County remains in agricultural production. Of the 375,798 acres of farmland in the county, 51% percent (191,657 acres) is designated as pastureland with approximately 120,000 head of beef cattle while crops make up 21% (78,917 acres). As citrus acreage in Highlands County decreases due to the devastation of Huanglongbing (HLB), also known as citrus greening, the population of the county increases as what were once flourishing citrus groves are being purchased for development. Even with the decrease in citrus acreage and increase in population, agriculture continues to be an important economic driver in the county.

Scattered across Highlands County are over 100 lakes ranging from 10 acres to the 27,600 acre Lake Istokpoga, Florida's 5th largest lake. The Kissimmee River flows through the eastern end of the county while creeks, including Arbuckle Creek and Fisheating Creek are scattered across the county. With an abundance of natural resources in the county, public misperceptions about the impact agriculture have on these resources present a challenge to agriculturalists in a historical agricultural community that is experiencing rapid urbanization.

Public Relations Objective:

Understanding the importance of agriculture to the county, Highlands County's Extension Agents, participate in numerous activities throughout the year to educate community members ranging elementary aged youth to residents in retirement communities. Agents welcome the opportunity to engage consumers and relay the efforts agriculturalists are making to preserve and protect Highlands County's natural resources.

While accepting invitations to speak in the community is welcomed Agents wanted to create an opportunity to positively promote agriculture and showcase the diversity of agricultural operations found in Highlands County and the economic and environmental importance of these operations. To do this Highlands County's Extension Agents hosts agriculture tours during the first part of the year. The agriculture tours consist of filling a charter bus with people with an Agent as the tour guide providing commentary about agriculture in the county and state and answering questions participants have while traveling to agricultural operations in the county. The objectives of the agriculture tours are to increase agricultural awareness and knowledge on a county and state level, to improve the public perception of agriculture and increase support of Florida agriculture.

Program Execution:

UF/IFAS Extension Highlands County Extension Agents collaborate with agriculturalists in the county to provide a day long tour of agricultural operations. This year Highlands County Extension Agents planned three tours focused on their job concentrations. Tours included a livestock tour, horticulture tour and ag and natural resources tour. Fifty-two seats are available for each tour and seats for each tour were quickly filled after promoting the tours in the local newspaper, various email lists and promotional flyers distributed throughout the community.

Prior to promoting the tour Agents were responsible for securing tour stops and coordinating times and transportation, preparing an informational booklet for attendees about tour stops and planning a meal.

The tours include multiple stops where participants learn from the families who own the operations or the employees managing the operations. Participants get to hear from the agriculturalists about the challenges they face, the efforts they make to protect resources and outlook on their respective industries. Between stops the Agent acts as a tour guide sharing information about agriculture in the county and state and answering questions participants have.

Members of the Highlands County Cattlemen's Organization generously volunteer their time to grill ribeye steaks for participants for lunch. Volunteers from the counties Master Gardener program assisted with serving lunch. Lunch on the horticulture tour and ag and natural resource tours was followed up with an on-site presentation from county employees who work on collecting water quality samples and discuss their efforts along with agriculturalists efforts to preserve and protect the county's water resources.

Results and Evaluation:

Post tour evaluations were given after the final tour stop which showed 93% of participants increased their knowledge of Florida agriculture, 100% of participants had a better understanding of issues farmers face with 88% having a better understanding of the importance of the agriculture industry in regards to food production and their role in preserving natural resources. An overwhelming 95% of participants indicated they plan to support Florida agriculture in some facet with many responding they will look for Florida grown and raised products when making purchases.

Many participants commented about how much they enjoyed the tour as they left. More in depth conversations were able to be had with participants who attended multiple tours, many of whom were already looking forward to signing up to participate again next year.

Tour participants increased their knowledge of the industry, their understanding of issues agriculturalists face, the importance of the industry and plan to adopt behaviors that support the state's agriculturalists. As reflected in the post tour surveys participants enjoyed their time, the tour stops and the information Agents provided between stops on the bus.

Providing opportunities for consumers to connect with producers and spend the day learning about agriculture is a great way to bridge the gap between consumers and producers and address misperceptions about the industry through showcasing the efforts agriculturalists make to preserve natural resources and protect the land on which they farm or ranch.