

Florida Water Management Districts

General Information

Florida's watersheds are grouped into five large basins, each managed by a water management district. The five districts are the Suwannee River, the Northwest, the St Johns River, the Southwest, and the South Florida. The largest district is South Florida, covering 17,930 square miles with a population of close to 7 million people. The smallest district is the Suwannee River, covering 7640 square miles with a population of 310,000 people.

The five districts operate independently and their mission statements and goals vary slightly. The Southwest Florida water management district sums up the general mission of all districts as "maintaining the balance between the water needs of current and future users as well as protecting and maintaining natural systems". The water management districts tend to focus on water quantity due to the sensitive nature of water supply and demand in the state, but all five districts have priorities that include environmental monitoring, ecosystem restoration, and land acquisition for water quality protection.

History

The Florida Water Resources Act of 1972 created the five water management districts to regulate construction and operation of storm water management systems and the withdrawal, diversion, storage, and consumption of water. Prior to 1972, Florida's water management legislation focused primarily on water quantity. It was with this act that water quality became important as well, taking into account pollution and adverse effects on natural resources, fish, and wildlife.

The Water Resources Act was based on the *Model Water Code*, developed by water law experts at the University of Florida. The original intent of the *Model Water Code* was to keep policy making decisions at the state level, with the water management districts making only operational decisions. However, the Water Resources Act directed the state-level authority, which at the time was the Department of Natural Resources, to work with the water management districts to the greatest extent possible and enter into interagency agreements. This resulted in the water management districts receiving responsibility not only for day-to-day management functions but also considerable policymaking authority including the ability to adopt and enforce regulations. According to a write-up in the Florida State Law Review this arrangement of authority is a fundamental flaw to the system, and at least one special interest group, the Florida Agricultural Coalition, has challenged this authority of the water management districts.

Governance

Each water management district is governed by a Governing Board, whose members are appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. The Board has between nine and eleven members, each of whom must have significant experience in one or more of the following areas: agriculture, development industry, local government, government or privately owned utilities, law, civil engineering, environmental science, hydrology, or accounting and finance. Each member must reside within the water management district. The term length is four years.

At this point, governance structure varies slightly. The existence of certain offices and the number and responsibilities of departments differ between water management districts.

All water management districts have an Executive Office of positions that report directly to the Governing Board. Three of the positions shared by all districts are the Executive Director, the Inspector General, and the Ombudsman. The Governing Board appoints an Executive Director who is subject to confirmation by both the Governor and the Senate. The Executive Director manages the district, overseeing staff and initiatives. The office of Inspector General reviews agency operations and gives an independent view through audits, reviews, evaluations, and investigations. Citizens are asked to contact this office to report illegal or fraudulent conduct, gross waste of public funds, gross neglect of duty, and gross mismanagement. The office of Ombudsman provides interaction between citizens and the district. Citizens may bring complaints and inquiries, and the Ombudsman acts as a neutral, confidential point of contact. Responsibilities include initiating meetings between disputing parties, responding to citizen inquiries, conducting site inspections, and performing investigations if needed. Other positions may be included in the Executive Office such as the Offices of Communications, Governmental Affairs, or Human Resources.

Each water management district has four or five departments that are responsible for the many initiatives of the district. The heads of these departments report either to the Executive Director, or in some cases, to a Deputy Executive Director that reports to the Executive Director. The roles of the departments vary between each water management district, however between them they manage permitting, water use regulation, groundwater programs, surveying, land acquisition, outreach, water quality monitoring, and environmental planning and assessment among other initiatives.

The water management districts each appoint a Water Resources Advisory Commission that acts as an advisory body to the Governing Board. The Commission works to build consensus in the public and private sectors on water resource activities and assists in developing programs to fit the needs of citizens. Members include a broad range of citizens that represent business, agriculture, the environment, government, and public interest.

The Southwest Florida water management district has the unique feature of its Basin Boards, which break the district into eight smaller watersheds. These provide a local perspective on projects and help establish priorities on a smaller scale.

Funding

The water management districts create their own budgets, which must be approved by the Governor each year. Expenditures vary by district depending on population, projects, and funding sources. The South Florida water management district, which includes the Everglades, had a budget of \$1.4 billion for FY07. Everglades restoration and protection accounted for 41% of the budget. In comparison, the Suwannee River water management district had the smallest budget of \$85 million for FY07.

In 1976, voters gave the districts authority to levy property taxes to fund their projects and goals. As one of the more controversial forms of funding, the contribution amount of taxes to the entire budget varies. The South Florida water management district consistently levies a tax annually of \$0.70 per \$1000 of assessed property value. This generates \$553 million dollars due to the large population of the area, and accounts for 41% of the total budget. The Suwannee River water management district, in comparison, has an annual budget of \$85 million dollars and levied \$0.49 per \$1000 of assessed property value for FY07. The ad valorem tax accounts for 7% of the district's total revenue.

The budget for each year includes left over funds from previous years. Other funding is generated through a variety of sources. Costs of administration for the water management districts come through the Florida General Revenue Fund. Districts may also issue bonds and assess permit application fees. Funding also comes through federal grants, local government investments, partnerships with other organizations, and legislatively funded programs.

The table below shows the funding information for the water management districts. State sources were not defined within the information researched and it is assumed to include both appropriated funding and state programs.

Water management district	Budget 2006-2007	Ad valorem tax rate	Ad valorem % contribution to budget	State sources % contribution to budget
South Florida	\$1.4 billion	0.7	41%	18%
Northwest Florida	\$134 million	0.05	3.9%	30%
Suwannee River	\$85 million	0.49	7%	>50% *
St Johns	\$353.1 million	0.462	40%	46%
Southwest Florida	\$383 million	0.422	64.8%	19.2%

*The Suwannee River water management district did not provide an exact amount for state sources, instead used a pie chart to graphically represent state funding. As underestimation was preferred to overestimation, the value of 50% is low.

All information was researched through Florida water management district websites.

Information located at:

Northwest Florida <http://www.nwfwmd.state.fl.us/>

Suwannee River <http://www.srwmd.state.fl.us/>

St Johns River <http://sjr.state.fl.us/>

Southwest Florida <http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/>

South Florida <http://www.sfwmd.gov/site/index.php?id=1>