





AGRI LEADER

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State wins \$1 million conservation grant

BY JOHN BUCHANAN
Central Florida's Agri-Leader
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Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has been awarded a \$1 million conservation innovation grant by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The grant money, announced Sept. 15, will be used to help individual farmers and ranchers become more efficient in their use of energy.

FDACS was one of 47 public and private entities around the U.S. that will receive funding.

Conservation innovation grants, funded by Environmental Quality Incentive Program money derived from the federal farm bill, are intended to stimulate the development and

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adoption of innovative energy conservation practices.

“These grants promote creativity and problem-solving efforts that benefit farmers and ranchers and protect our natural resources,” U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack said in announcing the recipients. “They’re critical in sparking new ideas and techniques for conservation on America’s private lands and improving the environment.”

The Natural Resources Conservation Service division of USDA has offered and administered these grants since 2004. However, this was the first time FDACS made a grant one, said Kelley Burk, deputy director of FDACS’s office of energy.

“Our reason for applying was that we want to be able to fund renewable energy demonstration projects in the agricultural industry in underserved areas and we haven’t really entered into energy efficiency to the extent we would like to. Our intent is to help our farmers become more energy efficient and also to learn to use different sources of energy.”

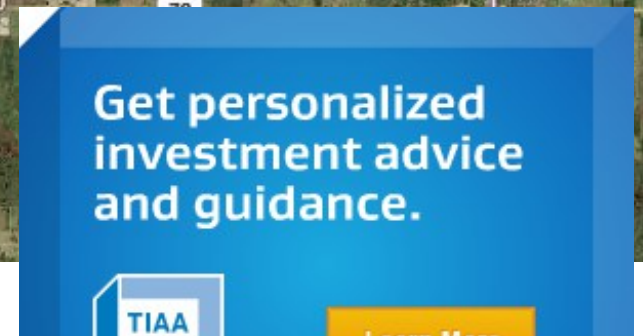
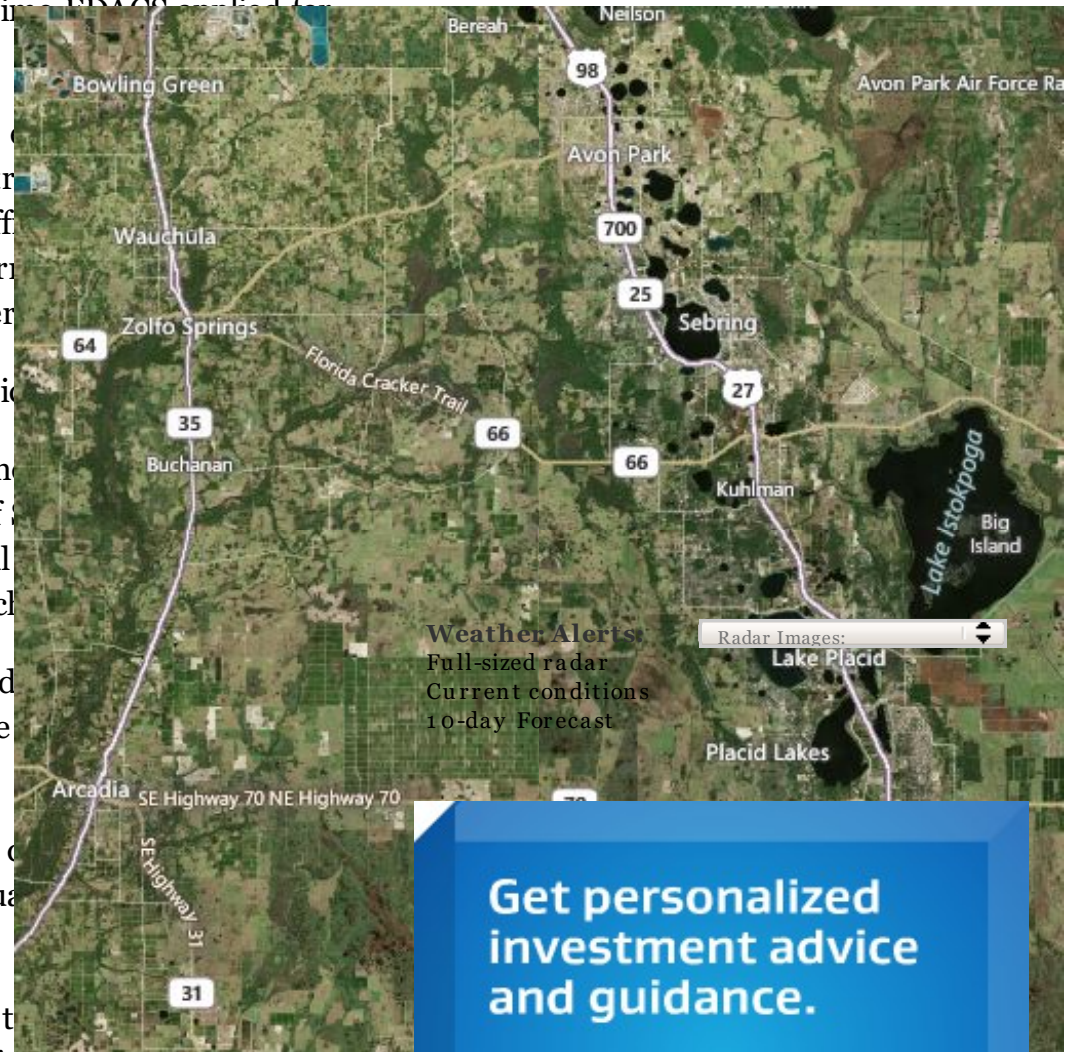
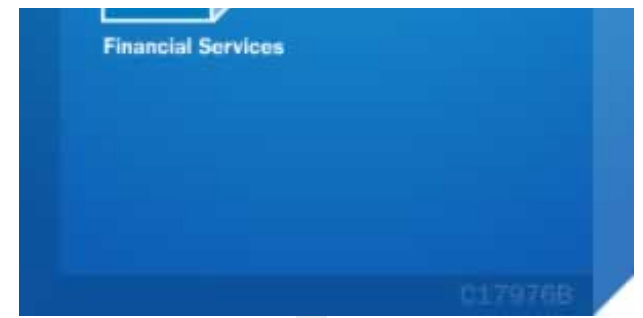
The ultimate goal, Burk said, is a greener footprint for the state’s agriculture.

Once FDACS has executed a formal contract with USDA for the funding, it will partner, including Florida Farm Bureau, the National Association of State Farm Bureaus and FDACS’s Office of Agricultural Water Policy to create a formal process for receiving applications from and awarding grants to individual farmers and ranchers.

Innovative water conservation efforts will be a key part of the Florida Farm Bureau’s strategy because such efforts have been a key focus of state agriculture since the 1930s, said Putnam.

Once a list of recommended agriculture energy efficiency practices is developed, the bureau will visit farms and ranches interested in receiving help to do individual energy efficiency projects.

“After we do the evaluation, we’ll provide the farm with a list of the technologies that can help them become more energy efficient in their farming practices,” Burk said. “Then from there, they will be able to apply through us for a grant to help fund the particular



technologies they intend to apply.”

In addition to the new \$1 million grant from USDA, FDACS also has available another

\$2 million in unused Farm to Fuel funds for the last two years. “We decided to combine the two in order to have a bigger pot of money for individual grants to farmers so we can reach as many as we can,” Burk said.

The new Florida program will be sustained for three years.

Jessica Bertine, agricultural economist in the Gainesville-based Florida office of NRCS, noted that the new program increased USDA’s focus on energy efficiency.

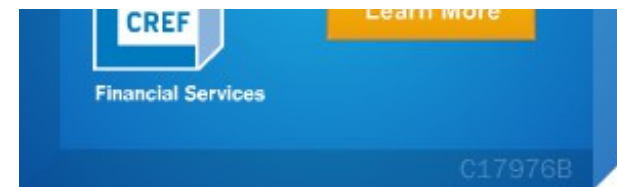
“It is a national thrust to improve energy efficiency,” said Bertine, who was a member of the national team that developed the initiative. “And these new grants are a part of that. We want to farmers and ranchers to adopt more energy efficient practices in their operations.”

Current examples of best practices in energy efficiency for farmers and ranchers include variable speed drives for irrigation systems, which make them more efficient in their use of energy, as well as conservation crop rotation and conservation tillage practices.

Other innovative practices include milk plate coolers for dairy farmers and more efficient lighting in boiler operations at chicken farms.

The reason the new program is so important, Bertine said, is that “it helps us get the word out better through our relationships with agencies such as Florida Department of Agriculture. They can reach out statewide. And once one farmer starts talking about these things and then another farmer starts talking about them, that will make it easier to bring people into the program. And all that helps farmers and ranchers learn to become more efficient, especially in those times when prices for their products might not be as good as they could be.”

For more information on the new program, contact one of USDA’s local service centers, found in all of Florida’s 67 counties.



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