INTRODUCTION:
With more than 550,000 acres of irrigated cropland, the Flint River basin of southwest Georgia is the state’s breadbasket with the market value of crops grown in the area estimated at $1.6 billion. But when farmers begin pumping water from the Floridan aquifer and the Flint River, both begin to drop. During a drought in 2011, farms in southwest Georgia pumped about 750 million gallons a day during the growing season—about 50 percent more than the amount metro Atlanta’s 15 counties use in a single day. And while metro water utilities encourage customers to fix leaks and install low flow toilets, in southwest Georgia, the Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District (the District) is on the front lines of water conservation in the agricultural community. One of the most active of Georgia’s 40 local conservation districts, it serves as a bridge between federal and state conservation programs and agricultural producers. The District has been a key player in converting 92 percent of the area’s crops to water-saving irrigation practices.

THE WATER BODY:
Perhaps the state’s most unique river, the Flint courses 346 miles from metro Atlanta to southwest Georgia where it joins the Chattahoochee to form the Apalachicola River in Florida. When the Flint arrives in southwest Georgia it interacts with the limestone of the Dougherty Plain with spectacular results. Limestone bluffs front the river and breathtakingly cold and beautiful blue hole springs rise up along its flanks to feed it. It’s these springs that are the connection with the Floridan aquifer which supplies much of the river’s flow...as well as much of the irrigation water used by southwest Georgia farmers. That interplay between the aquifer and the river have made the efficient use of irrigation water critical to protecting the Flint and uses downstream in Florida.

THE CLEAN:
In the ongoing court battle between Georgia and Florida over water supplies in the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint system, Georgia’s farmers are among those—along with water users in metro Atlanta—that Florida has implicated in harm to oyster harvests on Apalachicola Bay.
And, while the litigation continues, southwest Georgia farmers know their livelihood is at stake. They also know that efficient water use is the best savior for them and the health of Apalachicola Bay downstream.
“Access to water is the backbone of our agricultural economy,” said Casey Cox, the conservation district’s executive director. “We know that unless we are proactive, then future generations are not going to have the opportunities we do.”

To that end, the District has been busy. During the past 15 years, the District has secured some $22 million in federal, state and private sources to improve how farmers use water in the area, and has directed millions of dollars in Farm Bill funds to local farms for conservation projects. Together, the District’s efforts have impacted water use on more than 13 million acres of crops in Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

Recently, the District implemented a program on 40 farms that involves installing soil moisture sensors in fields that transmit data used by farmers to make better decisions about when and how much to irrigate. The producers access this information on mobile devices via Irrigator Pro, an irrigation scheduling tool developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that was converted to a smartphone app in partnership with the District.

Ultimately, it will improve yields and reduce production costs while keeping more water flowing in the Flint.

The District is also pioneering what’s known as dynamic variable rate irrigation on four farms in the area in partnership with the University of Georgia. The pilot program is designed to determine how to make this expensive, high-tech tool more affordable and accessible to all farmers.

Similarly, a District project funded through the Bonneville Environmental Foundation aims to restore flows on Spring Creek and Ichawaynochaway Creek through agricultural water efficiency programs. Both of these Flint River tributaries host federally protected mussel species. The project is unique in that it connects diverse private funders like Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, Georgia Aquarium, Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson Airport and Mercedes-Benz Stadium with farmers in southwest Georgia.

Connecting public and private funds and innovative programs with local farmers to address agricultural water use is what the District does best. And, with the outcome of ongoing disputes over water use still pending, that’s become increasingly important.

“It’s critical. The more efficient we can be, the more resilient we are,” Cox said. “We’re the grassroots organization that has that relationship with farmers and landowners and the ability to build strategic partnerships to implement best management practices on a large scale.”

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