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Flint River Soil & Water Conservation District Presented Clean 13 Water Heroes Award by Leading Water Protection Coalition

Yesterday, Georgia's leading water protection coalition presented its Clean 13 Water Heroes Award to the Flint River Soil & Water Conservation District (the District) for leading the way toward more sustainable agriculture in the heart of Georgia's breadbasket. The District is responsible for bringing millions of dollars in private and public funds to improve irrigation efficiency impacting some 13 million acres of cropland in southwest Georgia. To bring statewide recognition to this innovative work, the Georgia Water Coalition included the Flint River Soil & Water Conservation District in their 2019 Clean 13 report. The annual report highlights individuals, businesses, industries, non-profit organizations and governmental agencies whose extraordinary efforts have led to cleaner rivers, stronger communities and a more sustainable future for Georgians.

"The Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District is thrilled to be recognized for our work in agricultural irrigation efficiency and conservation in southwest Georgia," said Marty McLendon, Chairman of the District. "Our strong relationships with researchers, innovative trailblazers in the industry, producers and landowners allow the District to implement new technologies on farms throughout the region, improving economic and environmental sustainability of agriculture in Georgia."



From left, Gina Rodgers (Georgia Wildlife Federation), Gordon Rodgers (Flint Riverkeeper), Vanessa Merriweather (FRSWCD), Perri Campis (FRSWCD), Marty McLendon (Chairman FRSWCD), Rena Peck (Georgia River Network).

Rena Ann Peck, executive director of the Georgia River Network, presented the award on behalf of the Georgia Water Coalition to Perri Campis, executive director of the District, in a ceremony at the Albany Waterfront Park with local farmers, officials from the District, City of Albany, Dougherty County, and the Flint Riverkeeper present.

“The heartbeat of the Georgia agricultural economy beats strongest in the Flint River watershed”, said Gordon Rogers, executive director of the Flint Riverkeeper, “the work of the District is moving us closer and closer to sustainable and resilient production of food and fiber in a landscape that boasts a vibrant culture woven through farming communities and river towns.”



Perri Campis, Executive Director of the Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District, accepts the 2019 Clean 13 award on behalf of FRSWCD.

“The Flint Water River Soil Water Conservation District has become national model in advanced irrigation management. The District’s projects – including those such as at Glenn and Casey Cox’s sweet corn farm at Longleaf Ridge – are incorporating variable rate irrigation, central irrigation pivot sprayer retrofits and remote soil moisture monitoring,” said Rena Ann Peck, executive director with Athens-based Georgia River Network. “Millions of gallons of water have been saved by these projects over the years and these savings continue annually. These technologies reduce traditional water use by 15-20% - decreasing groundwater pumping to keep it available to recharge the Flint River and Radium Springs today.”

The District works with stakeholders, partners, and landowners bring practical conservation practices to the farm level, aiming to increase adoption of conservation practices and technologies. Projects include:

- **AgWet.** The District has partnered with UGA Extension to provide training, outreach, and resources to install soil moisture sensors in over 40 fields to provide real-time data for irrigation scheduling. On average, this improves irrigation water use efficiency by 15%. In 2019, this project resulted in 4,555 acres in best management practices and saved approximately 83 CFS.
- **Dynamic Variable Rate Irrigation (VRI).** The District is currently leading a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant in partnership with UGA and Auburn to install irrigation systems that apply customized rates of water based on individual management zones within a field. This project aims to compare yield and irrigation water use efficiency in conventionally managed systems against Dynamic VRI. Initial research suggests increased irrigation water use efficiency by up to 40% while increasing yields between 5 and 10%.

- **Irrigator Pro.** The District worked with Irrigator Pro developers at the National Peanut Research Lab to convert the manual desktop Irrigator Pro website into a dynamic app that uses real-time field data from soil moisture sensors to make irrigation scheduling recommendations for peanuts, corn and cotton. Irrigation scheduling is shown to increase irrigation water use efficiency by 15%. As of November 2019, Irrigator Pro has over 600 downloads. In the 2019 season, this translated to over 32,000 acres using the app for irrigation scheduling. An updated version of the app with features incorporated based on grower feedback was released for the 2020 season. Learn more at irrigatorpro.org or at <https://vimeo.com/440332926>
- **Smart Irrigation Month.** The District lead partners to launch the state's first ever Smart Irrigation Month campaign in 2019 to raise awareness of smart irrigation practices for both rural and urban settings. This state-wide effort reached over 600 people throughout the month. In 2020, the second annual campaign built on the existing platform of resources, reaching an additional 300 people. Each July this tool will expand upon the smart irrigation outreach efforts of the District and other partners. Visit smartirrigationgeorgia.com for more information.
- **On-farm Cost Share Programs.** Through partnerships with organizations such as the Bonneville Environmental Foundation, Southeast Aquatics Resource Partnership, and NRCS through Regional Conservation Partnership Programs, the District has leveraged millions of dollars towards direct on-farm investments in smart irrigation practices such as soil moisture sensors, variable rate irrigation, and other pivot irrigation retrofits.
- **Pecan Irrigation Scheduling Tools.** In one of the District's newest projects, researchers at the University of Georgia are collaborating with the District to collect real farm data to develop an irrigation scheduling tool for pecan production to compliment the existing suite of smart irrigation apps developed by the University of Georgia and University of Florida. The District plans to roll out a beta version of this tool by the 2021 season. Other smart irrigation apps improve irrigation efficiency by 15% on average.

The thirteen recipients of the Water Heroes award for 2019 were slated to receive their awards at a Gala Celebration in Atlanta on March 12, 2020. Unfortunately, the event was postponed due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and subsequent restrictions on large gatherings of people. As the COVID -19 crisis continued to escalate over recent months the Georgia Water Coalition permanently cancelled the event and instead chose to recognize these inspiring water heroes at locally organized small outdoor ceremonies. The Georgia Water Coalition also produced a video highlighting the Districts accomplishments, which can be viewed at: <https://vimeo.com/428171696>

Read the full 2019 Report at: <https://www.gawater.org/clean-13>

The Georgia Water Coalition is a consortium of more than 260 conservation and environmental organizations, hunting and fishing groups, businesses, and faith-based organizations that have been working to protect Georgia's water since 2002. Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of Georgians. The Coalition annually publishes the Clean 13 list not only to recognize these positive efforts on behalf of Georgia's water but also as a call to action for our state's leaders and citizens to review these success stories, borrow from them and emulate them.

The Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District is comprised of farmers, landowners, and community leaders that are dedicated to the conservation, wise use, and protection of natural resources in the Flint River Basin. Learn more about the District at flintriverswcd.org.

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