

Our farms are water recharge zones

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As higher housing densities are approved for developers, the continuation of rural land users and their economic viability is severely challenged in south Marion County.

Even though land prices have risen substantially, the economic factors of moving a farm operation signify a business risk of revenue to farm owners. The signature industry in Marion County is horse farms which create spin-off jobs and services. There is a finite amount of land in the county suitable for raising horses, and most of it is currently equine-utilized. Very sandy, dry or wet areas are not appropriate for high-quality equine production.

Only three other places in the world have the unique mineral-enriched soils and water that make Marion County so special for raising horses and other livestock.

Cattle and horse farms are taking part in the Marion County Clean Farms Initiative for managing animal waste, ensuring the protection of water resources underground. The highest aquifer recharge is located in the central limestone ridge through the center of the county. As urban uses sprawl into rural areas, the agricultural uses become fragmented and unsustainable.

Open-space connection, supporting wildlife values, is another important benefit of horse and cattle farms. Migrating birds cannot find rest or food in vast urbanized areas; they depend on a variety of wooded and open habitat.

The Cross Florida Greenway is a strategic wildlife habitat, but adjacent lands also should remain in open-space uses to preserve ecological balance and buffer the Greenway corridor.

Land held in pasture and forest does not require government services and saves communities money if services are only provided to urban, more densely populated areas. Florida ranks third in horse population - about 500,000 total, including about 40,000 in Marion County - with Texas (1 million) and California (700,000) as leading states in the equine population, as estimated by the study commissioned by the American Horse Council.

"The Economic Impact of the Horse Industry in the United States" study revealed \$39 billion in direct impact, and when indirect and induced spending are included, the full economic impact reaches \$102 billion.

Florida's thoroughbred breeding and racing industry produces an annual economic impact of \$2.2 billion, and generates a direct economic impact of \$1.3 billion per year, thus creating 22,000 direct jobs and 51,000 total jobs. Three-quarters of the thoroughbred farms and training centers in Florida are located in Marion County.

A priceless benefit of sustaining the horse farm and forestry land-use is recharge of the Floridan aquifer, as shown by maps of locally important farmland. These valuable soils are very vulnerable to pollution if urban development continues to sprawl across the landscape.

Conservation easements offer the best hope for protection of the aquifer, if landowners recognize their financial benefits by donating or selling such easements. Maintaining and restoring watersheds in the face of population pressures is essential to building resilience against the effects of global warming.

Darlene Weesner, a retired teacher and local environmental activist, is an artist and author who lives in Ocala. She is a founding member of the Shady Historic and Scenic Trails Association, Inc. (SHASTA) and a former longtime member of the Marion County Planning Commission.