



SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT

NEWS RELEASE

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Legacy Takes Osceola Students Outdoors for Science Lessons

Hands-on education program introduces high school students to SFWMD public lands



Osceola County School for the Arts students gather around a gopher tortoise burrow near Reedy Creek to collect data for the SFWMD's Legacy program.

Kissimmee, FL – High school students from Osceola County School for the Arts recently spent a day searching for gopher tortoise burrows in the Reedy Creek Management Area to experience their science lessons through Legacy, a new South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) environmental education program.

The hands-on program connects water resource and environmental education with land management activities. Legacy partners local high schools with District-managed public lands, where teachers and students learn by collecting information that will add to the knowledge and experience relied on by District land managers to make real-world decisions.

“Students who explore District lands through Legacy today will be stewards of these irreplaceable natural areas in the future,” said SFWMD Governing Board Vice Chair Jerry Montgomery. “This program is about building connections between our youth and publicly owned lands that are vital to Florida’s water resources and ecology.”

Originally developed by the St. Johns River Water Management District, the Legacy program utilizes the SFWMD’s expertise in land management, water resource and

environmental science to create classroom-specific activities tailored to certain sites. The goals of the program include:

- Strengthening the connection of District lands with water resource and environmental education
- Providing communities with new opportunities to benefit from public lands
- Enhancing environmental stewardship in youth
- Encouraging recreational use of public lands

Osceola County School for the Arts students are participating in Legacy through the Osceola County Schools Environmental Study Center. Data collected by these and other students will expand the reservoir of information District land managers use to evaluate the health of scrub and scrubby flatwoods plant communities at the 525-acre Osceola County Schools' scrub site at Reedy Creek. From sampling areas at the site, students recorded details about gopher tortoise burrows, including their size and whether they appeared to be active or inactive.

"The cool thing is the professionals aren't doing it for us. They're helping us do it ourselves," said School for the Arts junior Rebeca Gurnica.

Wildlife experts call the gopher tortoise a "keystone species" because it is the backbone of its habitat. Without the tortoise, the populations of more than 350 wildlife species that seek refuge or live in the burrows would be greatly reduced, if not eliminated, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

"The tortoises are an indicator of success," said SFWMD environmental analyst Ayouna Riddick. "If they're doing well and flourishing, then we know our land management techniques are on track."

The Osceola County Schools Environmental Study Center at Reedy Creek is one of four sites around the 16-county District that will be part of the Legacy program in 2010-2011. A riverine cypress swamp is located in the watershed of Reedy Creek, which connects Lake Russell to Cypress Lake and Lake Hatchineha. While floodplain swamp dominates, 13 additional communities, including rare dry prairie, mesic flatwoods and scrub are also found. The other three Legacy sites for 2010-2011 are:

- **Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) Marsh** – Lee and Collier counties
- **Loxahatchee Impoundment Landscape Assessment (LILA)** – Palm Beach County
- **DuPuis Management Area** – Martin County

For more information on the Legacy program, please visit the District's Educational Programs [website](#) or read this [fact sheet](#).

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About the South Florida Water Management District

The South Florida Water Management District is a regional, governmental agency that oversees the water resources in the southern half of the state – 16 counties from Orlando to the Keys. It is the oldest and largest of the state's five water management districts. The agency mission is to manage and protect water resources of the region by balancing and improving water quality, flood control, natural systems and water supply. A key initiative is cleanup and restoration of the Everglades.