

Busy Shires Byerly: Protecting farms is more important than ever



A farm on Northwest 80th Avenue in Marion County's Farmland Preservation Area. [Elma Garcia-Cannavino photo]

By Busy Shires Byerly/Special to The Star Banner

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The Marion County Commission has designated the month of April as Farmland Preservation Month. During this time of uncertainty, having access to fresh, locally grown food has become even more important and the value of agricultural land with productive and resilient soils has increased. Marion County's rich agricultural heritage and abundance of farms is also an important part of our economy.

However, with the restricted access to restaurants and the closing of schools, many large-scale farmers are not able to sell their produce or

milk and are plowing over fields and dumping milk. This is an immediate problem facing Florida farmers.

To address this issue, the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is collaborating with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to compile a list of farms, distributors and farmers markets selling Florida-grown food directly to consumers. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/floridafoodmarkets>.

In addition, to help farmers through this challenging time, the American Farmland Trust (AFT) has created the Farmer Relief Fund to award farmers and ranchers with cash grants of up to \$1,000 each. For more information, visit <https://bit.ly/farmerrelieffund>.

“Now, more than ever, the future of many farms, businesses and families across America is uncertain. But one thing remains absolute – we must eat to live. Where does that food come from? This is a serious question. At AFT, we have been answering this question for over 40 years and the answer always comes back to the farmer,” says Billy Van Pelt II, senior director of external relations for AFT.

Once things return back to normal, Horse Farms Forever is working in partnership with the American Farmland Trust to hold a Conservation Summit to present the State of the States report about the loss of prime agricultural lands, not only in Florida, but also across the Southeast.

This summit will also be a call to action for community leaders. The goal is to move forward with developing new growth management policies in Marion County to protect the horse farms, agricultural lands and unique natural springs that are fundamental and critical components of the economy, identity and global brand of Marion County.

During this time, please support your local farmers by shopping at some of the farms, distributors and farmers markets listed on the UF/IFAS website.

Busy Shires Byerly is director of conservation strategies for the Ocala-based Horse Farms Forever.

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