

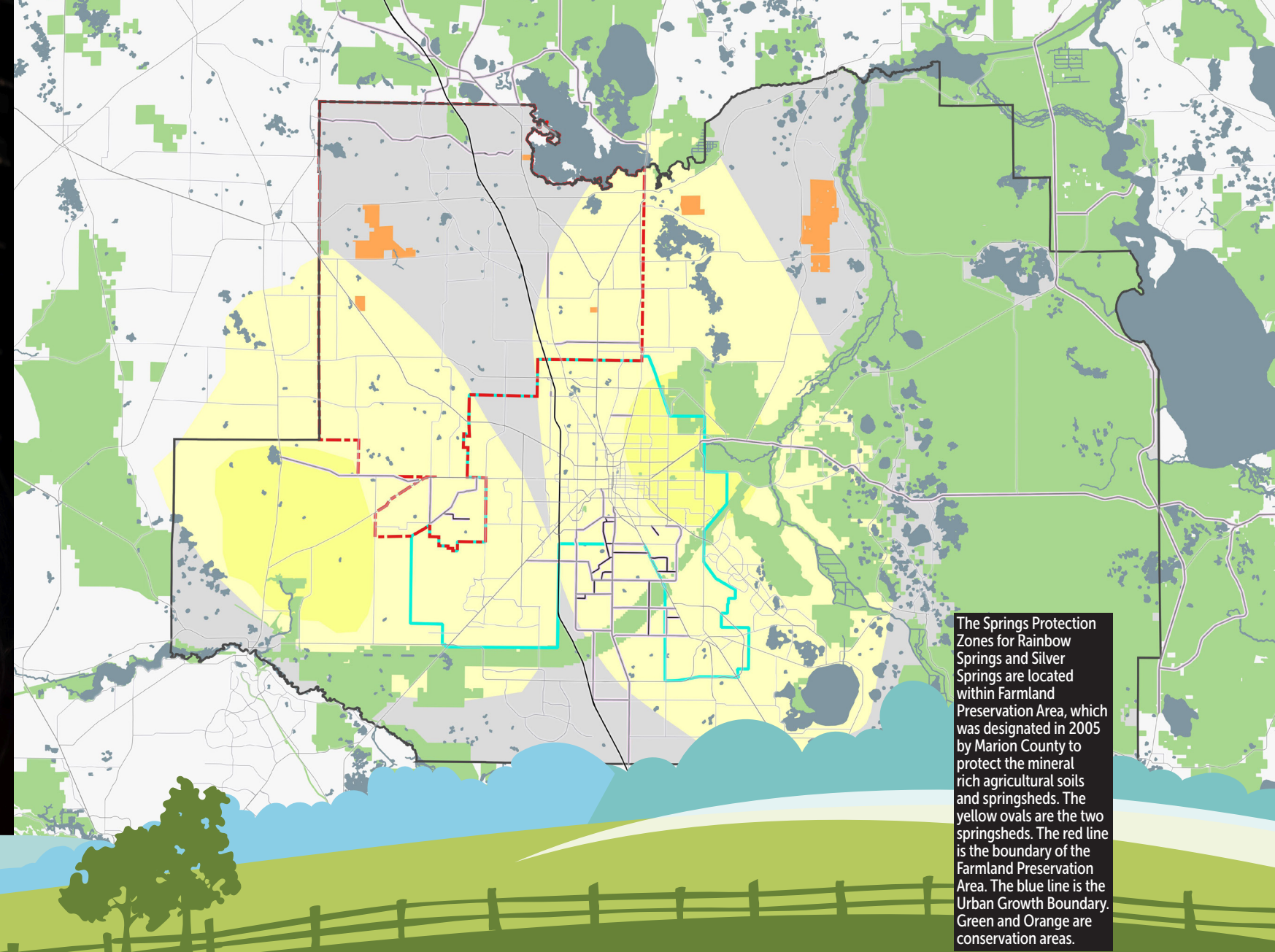
Farmland and Springs

*Horse Farms
Forever Summit:
How farms protect
our springs*

BY BRAD ROGERS | PHOTOS BY SEAN M. DOWIE



Margaret Ross Tolbert
International Artist of the Springs



The Springs Protection Zones for Rainbow Springs and Silver Springs are located within Farmland Preservation Area, which was designated in 2005 by Marion County to protect the mineral rich agricultural soils and springsheds. The yellow ovals are the two springsheds. The red line is the boundary of the Farmland Preservation Area. The blue line is the Urban Growth Boundary. Green and Orange are conservation areas.

Ocala is proudly known as the Horse Capital of the World®. As home to the world's largest and most famous freshwater springs, Silver Springs, it is also arguably the springs capital of the world — with Three First Magnitude Springs that, together, churn out nearly 1 billion gallons of water every day.

Unbeknownst to many, Ocala's legacies of its horse farms and its springs are inextricably linked.

That connection was the focus of Horse Farms Forever's 5th Annual Conservation Summit, *Conversations About Conservation*,

held at Ocala Breeders Sales on November 14th, where a lineup of noted springs experts spoke about how vital the preservation of our horse farms is to the preservation of our springs. Speakers included cinematographer Mark Emery, international springs artist Margaret Ross Tolbert, and National Geographic Explorer and geologist Dr. Jason Gulley. Guy Marwick, this year's Acorn Award winner, also spoke passionately about protecting the springs.

Emery, a globetrotting Emmy Award-winning cinematographer, composer and photographer who has done work in 35 countries for National Geographic, the

Smithsonian Network, the BBC and PBS among others, is a native Marion Countian. He talked about his experiences growing up around Silver Springs as well as the state of Florida springs today.

As a young man, Emery wrestled alligators and milked rattlesnakes alongside the famed Ross Allen in Silver Springs' heyday and even did a short stint as a captain of the park's renowned glass-bottom boats.

It was those experiences that created his passion for our springs.

"This area, just because of its springs,

has been drawing people to this area for centuries," Emery told the summit audience of about 450 people.

But as Ocala has grown, he said, Silver Springs and Marion County's other two First Magnitude Springs, Rainbow and Silver Glen, have faced increasing pressure from nitrate pollution and overpumping of the aquifer. The spring flow at Silver Springs is down from its historical 550 million gallons a day to 400 million gallons a day today. And invasive algae growth fueled by nitrate pollution that started in the 1970s has dramatically reduced the clarity of the springs.

Despite the loss of clarity and spring flow, Emery noted that our springs remain an important part of our community, both environmentally and economically.

Gulley, a National Geographic Explorer, research geologist and photographer, echoed Emery's thoughts on our springs.

He said that with some 1,000 freshwater springs across the state, Florida is home to more springs than any place on earth. And in addition to being a window into our water supply, the Floridan Aquifer, they also feed some of our most important rivers, like the Suwannee, Santa Fe and Silver. Marion County's three First Magnitude Springs, he noted, pump out a billion gallons of water a day.

Like Emery, he bemoaned the decline of our springs, re-emphasizing that water flow is down significantly and that preserving our springs is not only imperative for protecting our water supply, but also can have an important economic impact on our community. He cited the restoration of Crystal River's springs, which draw large crowds year-round to see the manatees, as a springs success story that every springs community should emulate.

"Healthy springs support healthy local economies," the University of South Florida professor said.

But it was Guy Marwick — who received Horse Farms Forever's prestigious annual Acorn Award for his contributions



Sara Powell Fennessy, Mark Emery, Busy Shires, Bernie Little, Dr. Jason Gulley, Margaret Ross Tolbert and Guy Marwick

to preserving Ocala's open spaces, including its horse farms – who drove home the point that preserving our horse farms is critical to preserving our springs.

Marwick has been a visible and outspoken advocate for preserving Ocala's open spaces since moving here in 1970. Besides being the creator and longtime director of the Silver River Museum – which hosts 10,000 public school students every year – he has led fights to slow stormwater runoff into Silver Springs, acquire and preserve some 11,500 acres of land around Silver Springs and has been a major environmental philanthropic force as executive director of the Felburn Foundation.

"There's nothing more precious than keeping some of these beautiful open lands open and beautiful," he said. "I really believe that one of the things we need to do is look beyond the borders of the Farmland Preservation Area (FPA) for other land that needs to be preserved."

The Farmland Preservation Area, 193,000 acres in northwest Marion County that is home to some of the county's most celebrated horse farms, was designated by the Marion County Commission in 2005. It has been the focal point of HFF since the



Amy Mangan, Executive Director, AdventHealth Ocala Foundation, Erika Skula, President & CEO, and Billye Mallory, Community Relations Manager

organization's founding in 2018. That founding was spurred by a now-rescinded state plan to build a highway through the middle of the FPA and some of our most important horse farm country.

But as Busy Shires, HFF director of conservation, pointed out, the FPA doesn't exist just to protect the equine industry – it also helps to protect our springs. Because of its soil makeup – it is high in limestone and it is also highly permeable — the FPA serves as a major springshed and recharge area for Rainbow Springs and Silver Springs because the limestone allows the rainfall to recharge the aquifer.

Shires calls these two springsheds, "the lungs of Marion County," an apt description

when the two are shown on a map (see adjoining map), because they are the key sources for replenishment of the aquifer, often referred to as "the lifeblood of the springs" and is the source of much of Florida's drinking water.

The vision of HFF is "to inspire the preservation of horse farms, and by protecting our farms for the equine industry, we are also protecting the health of our springs," Shires said.

HFF President Bernie Little followed the speakers, reminding the audience of the importance of the equine industry to Ocala, where 22 percent of the local workforce is tied to that industry.

Little also said HFF's goal, beyond tracking and weighing in on road or devel-



HFF President Bernie Little, Guy Marwick, Executive Director of The Felburn Foundation, and Margaret Spontak, President of the Great Florida Riverway Trust



George Isaacs, General Manager, Bridlewood Farm and HFF Founder & Director, Erika Skula, AdventHealth Ocala President & CEO and Brian Roberts, Manager, Brook Ledge Horse Transportation, Ocala.



Chester Weber, HFF Founder and Director, Michelle Stone, Marion County Commissioner, Charlie Stone, former member of the FL House of Representatives



Springs Forever Poster Contest winners

opment proposals that adversely affect the FPA, is to expand the organization's efforts on education, awareness and the exchange of ideas – all in the pursuit of protecting our farmlands and equine industry.

In its fifth year, the summit has covered a host of pertinent issues related to the preservation of our horse farms and farmlands in general. Since its inception, the summit has addressed topics including the importance of conservation easements, the public's recognition that farmland preservation is vital to Ocala's future, building roads and highways without destroying farmlands, helping create

the Florida Wildlife Corridor through conservation easements and, this year, the importance of horse farms to preserving our springs.

In addition to the discussion of the relationship between the \$4.3 billion-a-year local equine industry and our fabled springs, this year's Conservation Summit also included:

- AdventHealth Ocala President and CEO Erika Skula discussing the hospital's new Harnessing Health: Equine Worker Health Initiative to provide on-site health care to horse farm workers. "I was honored to represent AdventHealth Ocala as one of the presenting sponsors at

the annual Horse Farms Forever event. This event aims to raise awareness about the importance of conservation, not only for our local horse farms but also in the broader region and state. It was incredible to welcome a crowd of nearly 400 attendees and speak about the necessity of creating a sustainable environment for our beautiful county, recognizing that healthy land leads to a healthy community," wrote Skula in a Facebook post.

- A salute to Brook Ledge Horse Transportation for being the title sponsor for the fifth year in a row of the Conservation Summit. "As a business, we think about how we can give back to this place and the horse farms and families that we've been able to serve. It's so easy to think in the 'now,' but the 'now is tomorrow and the next day. We want to encourage growth in Marion County but there is still plenty of land where that can strategically happen so that everyone can flourish in such a wonderful place that is Marion County," said Brian Roberts, Manager, Brook Ledge Horse Transportation, Ocala.
- Presented awards to a dozen local school children who won the summit's Springs Forever poster contest. OM