



FSA 2026 Excellence Awards
Lee County Nomination – Public Education Effort

The Lee Board of County Commissioners has supported a decades-long commitment to educate Lee County residents (est. 2024 population: 840,698) and visitors about clean water and waterway preservation through its Fertilizer Education and Outreach Program (fertilizesmart.com).

This public education and outreach campaign was originated by the Lee County Department of Natural Resources, and staff from that department and the Office of Community Engagement complete the internal campaign team. In 2024, the County contracted Priority Marketing to develop and implement major components of the latest campaign creative material and approach.

The annual budget for the public education and outreach contract with Priority Marketing is \$220,000.00, and additional funding of approximately \$25,000.00 is spent on printed materials, educational handouts, and partner sponsorships designed to support the education effort. The funding for this education program is Lee County's General Fund which is supported by ad valorem taxes.

The objective of the Fertilize Smart public education campaign is to engage and educate the community about proper fertilizer use, irrigation practices, proper disposal of pet waste, Florida-friendly landscape practices, and other factors that affect water quality. The goal for this robust education and outreach effort is to prompt personal behavior change: the desired outcome is to reduce nonpoint stormwater pollution sources, and in so doing decrease impacts to local waterways and improve water quality in surface waters.

As part of this effort, in 2024 Lee County introduced "Lee the Gnome" as a campaign mascot and marketing strategy element to capture the public's attention and reinforce the campaign's educational messages. Lee's message is primarily "Gnome more fertilizing!" Lee County then took the campaign mascot to the next level to even further engage with the community: we brought our mascot to life.



The education and outreach effort strategies and tactics include:

- Drafting articles and news releases, pitching stories, conducting interviews, creating social media content, maintaining a specific webpage (FertilizeSmart.com) and providing quotes or commentary for media
- Attending multiple pertinent community events throughout the year to provide in-person education and outreach to the public
- Providing fact sheets/resource sheets for target media and an online media tool kit
- Proactively pitching stories to the media and coordinating interviews to share key messages
- The use of billboards in high-traffic areas of the county during the summer fertilizer blackout period
- Sponsorship agreements with Major and Minor League baseball teams playing in Lee County
- A campaign mascot costume for community engagement

Pre-and-post education campaign surveys used to gauge meeting goals show an increase in respondents' awareness of the pertinent information. Further proof that the campaign has reached the target audience is evidenced by an increase in reach (percentage of individuals in the target demographic exposed to a commercial at least once over the length of the campaign) and frequency (the average number of times a person in the target demographic is exposed to a commercial over the length of the campaign) of media coverage by 20% from May 2024 to April 2025.



Lee County Fertilizer Education and Outreach Program *Supporting Information*



Billboards

Five billboards with 3 different campaign graphics are displayed in high-traffic areas of unincorporated Lee County during the summer fertilizer blackout period.



Outreach and Education Materials



Campaign promotion strategies include displaying retractable banners at community recreation centers, county buildings and outreach events, printed informational material, and useful, reusable handouts that reinforce the message. A few examples of campaign graphics are shown here.



Lee County's educational messaging about responsible fertilizer practices has been widely spread by television (both paid advertising and interviews), radio, newspaper and other local print media outlets.

To receive the Government, send here: www.lee.gov letters and follow lee.gov/soc

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Community Engagement and Outreach

Lee County Natural Resources staff participates in multiple well-attended community events such as Goldenfest, the Lee County Ag Expo, Major and Minor League baseball games, garden festivals and more throughout the year. These events provide an opportunity to engage face to face with the public, provide printed materials and handouts, and educate the public about responsible fertilizer and pet waste disposal practices as well as many other water quality issues.



Sample of Social Media Posts

Lee County has a very active social media presence for the campaign – static posts, videos, and fresh content all year round, plus an email distribution list.





Lee County
Southwest Florida

Lee the Gnome



The Lee County Fertilizer Education and Outreach Program campaign mascot, Lee the Gnome, was brought to life in the form of a custom-designed mascot costume. Lee's tropical shirt design incorporates the Lee County logo to attract attention and enhance county recognition at events. As the face of the campaign, Lee will make public appearances to create more campaign awareness, increase public engagement, and create a fun and memorable interactive experience for the community.



Bringing the Campaign Mascot to Life

Lee County is fully invested in its Fertilizer Education and Outreach effort! Lee the Gnome, the garden gnome that is the campaign mascot and a recognizable messaging ambassador, has been brought to life. Scenes from the mascot costume introductory video are shown below (the mascot costume “reveal” video may be viewed at FertilizeSmart.com).

