

The FGCSA Goes to Tallahassee

By Joel Jackson

If we have learned one thing from all the Tom Morgan seminars on communications and the media, it is that the politicians will usually be forced into taking action once the media starts headlining the claims of activists. Dr. Morgan's take-home message is that we need to be proactive on all levels and with all audiences.

With the help of Dr. Morgan, the

world information resource when environmental issues come across their desks. We also decided to make the recent trends in IFAS budget cuts as our main topic of concern.

Mike Goldie has established a good working relationship with the state legislators, and that is evidenced by the personal comments about him from the legislators. We had appointments with representatives and senators who were on the appropriations, agriculture and natural resource committees and we

ments that will force state money to be spent on voter-mandated projects.

The members of the 2003 Legislative Delegation were FGCSA President David Court, CGCS; Vice President Greg Pheneger; Director Darren Davis, Everglades GCSA and myself. We were joined by Coastal Plains Chapter President Jeff Heggen and Director Doug Abbuhl, who live in Tallahassee. We all agreed that the trip had been worthwhile and should be a regular undertaking. We also got a first-hand look at how valuable it is to have a good lobbyist. Mike did a good job. Our only regret is that we have underutilized him in the past.

We also got a lead on another way we can educate legislators from House Ag Committee Chairman Rep. Joe Spratt (R-Sebring). He mentioned that he would organize Legislator Ag Tours similar to the regulator tours to show freshmen legislators what Florida agriculture really looked like and how impor-



FGCSA Delegation: (Left to right) Front row: David Court, CGCS, Greg Pheneger and Doug Abbuhl. Back Row: Mike Goldie, Jeff Heggen and Darren Davis.

Everglades Chapter is currently working on a communications plan that hopefully will be a model for others to follow. The plan will create messages and opportunities targeted to reach superintendents, golfers, the general public, the media, regulators and politicians.

Background

Last year we participated in the Regulator Ag Tour coordinated by the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association with a golf course stop at the Old Colliers GC hosted by Tim Hiers, CGCS. Thirty to thirty-five regulatory officials from the United States Environmental Protection Agency in Washington and Region 4 in Atlanta and officials from Florida Department of Environmental Protection and Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs were on the tour and got an earful from Tim on how golf courses really work. We are going to be the first stop on the tour this year on March 31, and we plan to participate every year from now on.

Well, it didn't take too much thinking that if we are reaching out to the regulators we also need to educate our politicians about our industry. We began thinking about creating a delegation of FGCSA officers to work with Mike Goldie, our lobbyist in Tallahassee, to set up some appointments with legislators. Our mission was primarily one of introduction to let them know we are out there as a real-

wrapped up the two-day visits with a meeting with Charles Bronson, Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs.

We left a folder with each legislator that contained

- an executive summary of the Florida Golf Economic Impact Study;
- 2000 US Geological Survey Report showing golf only uses 3.2% of the water statewide
- a series of GCSAA Green Tips fact sheets on golf courses and the environment, pesticides and water conservation
- a fact sheet on the benefits of turfgrass;
- two articles on golf course management and studies showing the use of pesticides and fertilizers are not harmful when used as directed.

Each meeting was slightly different and each member of the delegation shared something that showed how golf courses and our organization are dedicated to being good stewards of the environment. The questions and comments indicated that we definitely made a good impression with them.

With regard to the IFAS budget cuts, several of the legislators come from Ag backgrounds and they know how important IFAS is as a research and development resource for the ag industry in Florida, but they were candid about how difficult reversing the cuts will be in the face of all the constitutional amend-

tant it was to the economy of Florida. We will be working to get a golf course stop on the next tour that the legislators take.

We got to meet some of the other lobbyists at lunch on both days, and we got a crash course in Tallahassee politics. It was a very educational trip for us and will help us to plan our future visits. Mike had this message for anyone interested in reaching out to local politicians. He said, "The most effective way to get to know a legislator is to invite them to a local chapter meeting when they are out of session. They have a vested interest because you are the folks that vote for them and maybe donate to their campaigns. You can invite them to give a legislative update and over lunch you can talk to them about current issues. It's a good idea to make sure it's a well attended event so you have a good audience."

We have taken the first steps in making sure we reach out to our lawmakers with concerns and facts about the issues. Take time to do the same at the local chapter level.

Editor's Note: Just before deadline the latest word from Tallahassee and IFAS is that in response to concerns from Ag leaders, the legislature is pledging to hold to last year's budget totals and not make additional cuts as anticipated.