Experiencing a Summer Internship
by Nicolas Rinaldi



As a college senior at the University of South Florida Tampa campus majoring in environmental science and policy, I had the opportunity this summer to intern with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's South District office. The district consists of nine counties: Charlotte, Collier, Desoto, Highlands, Hendry, Glades, Lee, Monroe and Sarasota. It has been a hands-on opportunity – learning how to monitor and protect Florida natural resources for Florida's citizens – and it has been a rewarding experience.

I interned with the South District's Community Outreach program with ombudsman Terry Cerullo and environmental specialist Martha Avila. My work with staff offered me the opportunity to travel throughout the South District taking part in a wide variety of outreach events and field experiences. Right from the start, my second day, I joined a staff member to collect water quality data on various water bodies across Lee County and performed tests to monitor and record the findings.

On a trip to the Sarasota County landfill and other waste management facilities, I accompanied James Standiford to conduct a biannual permit inspection for the landfill and waste collection facilities. I was given a tour of the landfill facility and explained the "ins and outs" of the engineering feat that is a modern landfill. The Sarasota landfill was well managed and would overcome any public misconception accompanying landfills. On another day I took part in a wetland determination, which involved getting out into the field and identifying plants and taking soil samples to determine if a permit is needed to build on the site, which showed that the site was in fact wetlands. The inspector will contact the requesters to discuss their options depending upon what their goals are for the property.

I attended and helped coordinate several events for the department. One was to provide assistance to local golf courses. The district invited the golf course managers to a compliance assurance workshop helping them to understand best management practices for hazardous materials to help create an environmentally healthier golf course and still grow their business. The South District calls its compliance assurance workshops "Greening Your Bottom Line." The workshops provide education to help businesses grow while protecting the environment. I was surprised how much golf course maintenance management deals with regulations they need to follow.

Working in the professional atmosphere of the department was an enormous step up from college to starting my career. Being able to see the lab assignments I learned in college actually used and applied in the workplace and in the field was very gratifying.

Being a resident of Lee County, I was raised with a passion for southwest Florida's unique wetland ecosystems and wildlife. I always wanted to be out in the field working to protect and preserve our delicate regional environment. Leaning how the department functions in accordance with local, state and federal rules and regulations to protect our environment was important to me. And seeing how staff interacted with local communities, the public and the private sector to protect our environment was most beneficial.

Observing what these environmental protection professionals come across and how their jobs – like permitting, inspections and compliance assurance – are completed brought me a better understanding of how environmental science and policy is accomplished in the workforce by different stakeholders wanting to expand Florida's economy and protect the environment together.

Note: Nicolas' internship with the South District allowed him to graduate in August instead of December 2014.