The latest annual legislative session is in full swing, and with Governor Rick Scott in his second term and new leadership in the Florida Senate and House, water issues are expected to be a hot topic. In fact, it’s said that this is to be the “year of water.”

On February 17, a delegation from FSAWWA, led by Utility Council Chair Rob Teegarden, descended on Florida’s capitol for the 2015 Legislative Day in Tallahassee. This year’s events provided an in-depth discussion with legislators on water policy solutions to establish water funding priorities.

Water expert Edgar Fernandez led things off with introductions, while Teegarden gave an overview of the day. A strong contingent of more than 40 FSAWWA member volunteers were in attendance to voice concerns about water issues. Assigned to six different teams and arranged by geographic locations around the state, Utility Council members briefed the teams on topics to be discussed and introduced them to their team leaders. Armed with information and led by knowledgeable, passionate, and motivated team leaders, it was then time to sit down and discuss water topics face-to-face with 49 of Florida’s legislators.

The prevailing theme throughout the day was that water issues must be comprehensive and statewide, with the long-term health of Florida’s ecosystem in mind. Policies must be flexible, with both long- and short-term strategies that include strategic investments in water projects that will improve our overall supply and quality.

No issue is more important to maintaining the quality of life of the citizens of Florida than an abundant and clean supply of water. Adequate investment in water infrastructure ensures safe and reliable water systems to attract and retain industry, business, and qualified workers, which are essential to economic vitality and growth. Conservative estimates for maintaining and protecting this vital resource over the next 20 years total a staggering $43 billion.

One of the key points for teams as they met with legislators was Amendment 1, which was approved last November by 75 percent of the voters and is sure to get a lot of attention. Many believe that the amendment allows for a portion of the funds to be used for water and water infrastructure needs if those expenditures protect or conserve water resources or natural systems. This is what the teams focused on and the message that was delivered at each meeting. Funding for water projects can and should come from Amendment 1 dollars as long as they protect or conserve water resources or natural systems as the amendment reads.

Other topics included continuing services contract limits, line relocation study, water infrastructure funding, water policy legislation, and utility employee safety. All of these issues were received well by legislators throughout the day.

We were all treated to a meeting with Adam Putnam, Florida’s commissioner for agriculture, who expressed his passion and commitment to protecting the quantity and quality of the state’s water supply. He pointed out that creative solutions are necessary for water policy and that he would like to see an “overarching regional framework” in which all parts of Florida help one another. Commissioner Putnam said that “the biggest challenge to Florida’s long-term growth was getting water policy right.” It was refreshing to see his energy and enthusiasm concerning water policy.

At the end of the day it looks like water policy is getting the needed attention it deserves. The Utility Council has been working with legislators for years on the importance of water to this state. Every single legislator that we talked to was acutely aware of, and engaged in, water policy. Hard work does pay off.

The FSAWWA Utility Council does a fantastic job of organizing this every year. Kudos to all the volunteers for a job well done. The value of becoming a Utility Council member is clearly evident by the accumulation of work throughout the year that is presented in one day at the state’s capitol. Come join us next year—I guarantee you will be impressed and informed. I know I was.