

Many new homes in Polk County are saving water for the future

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Tony Campano walks into the model home at Lake Alfred Pines

Twelve cities in Polk County now mandate the Florida Water Star program for new homes, making it the epicenter of the program statewide.

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More than 1,000 people a day are moving into Florida. Having enough water to slake their thirst — as well as that of their lawns — can be a challenge.

We go to Polk County, where rampant growth is persuading some cities to take up that challenge.

Tony Campano opens the door to a model home in the latest subdivision cropping up in central Polk County. It's perched on undulating hills that used to be citrus groves. Now, the major cash crop for this area just south of busy I-4 is new homes.



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Campano points to reinforced water pipes beneath the kitchen sink

"So we are in [Lake Alfred Pines](#) in Polk County, a beautiful community of 79 home sites," says Campano, vice president of procurement for Pulte Homes.

He points to what look like an ordinary washing machine.

But there's a difference with it and the dishwasher, showers — and toilets — in these homes. They all are part of a program called [Florida Water Star](#), which aims to lower the thirst of the nation's fastest growing state.

"So we've got some low-flow faucets, lower-flow shower heads," he says. "We put a lot of time and effort into making sure we pick the right fixtures that are visually attractive but perform the way Water Star needs them to perform."

The program started 15 years ago in Jacksonville, trying to encourage water efficiency in new and existing homes. It's now a voluntary statewide program. But some cities are now mandating these water-efficient features be built into new homes.



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Looking out the back window at the model home

Twelve cities in Polk — including Lake Alfred — now mandate it for new homes, making it the epicenter of the program statewide, says [Robin Grantham](#), Florida Water Star program administrator at the [Southwest Florida Water Management District](#).

"It's really taking place in Polk County, because some of these cities are looking at tripling their population in five to 10 years," Grantham said. "And when you're looking at that kind of population growth, you need to be able to provide the water supply in order for those homeowners to be able to drink their water and to water those landscapes."

And there's another reason: water district officials say the underground aquifer here is getting lower because of so much demand from new residents. So Grantham says water suppliers may have to soon drill deeper into the aquifer in Polk County — at a tremendous cost.

"If builders aren't able to construct homes that are using less water, the cities don't want to have to put them in the position of saying, you know, we can't do any more permits. We don't have that water supply," Grantham said. "So it's allowing those cities to continue to grow, increase their tax base, while also reducing their dependency on the ground water resource."

Water Star officials estimate [each home saves](#) around 48,000 gallons of water annually. That's a reduction of about one-fifth of the amount used every year. And that means homeowners save more than \$500 a year on their utility bills — an average of about two month's savings.



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Campano turns on a low-flow faucet in the kitchen

And it's not just for the inside of the home. Back in Lake Alfred, Campano steps outside to show micro-irrigation jets that deliver a light spray directly to the base of plants. That's just on the front lawn. Out back, the plants are on their own — no irrigation is provided. That means no St. Augustine lawns, which are notorious water hogs.

"And actually, only 60 percent of the lawn can be irrigated," Campano said.

Even though they don't have a choice whether to participate here, it only costs new homeowners a modest bump in prices on models with prices starting at a little over \$300,000. And the program does have some draws for new home buyers.

"First of all, we all need to do our part in protecting our natural resources. So that's a small incentive," Campano said. "But financially, there is an annual savings. So it brings the overall cost of maintaining your home and keeping your home down from the average home that is not Water Star certified."

And Grantham says it's good business — the homeowner gets better-built appliances, and plants that are better able to withstand the state's frequent droughts.