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Sunshine Activism

Florida's Dramatic Turnabout on Climate Change

By Jim Motavalli

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Since Jeb Bush left the governor's office in 2006 and fellow Republican Charlie Crist succeeded him, Florida has become a leader in state efforts to combat climate change. Crist pointed out in his inaugural address that low-lying Florida, with nearly 1,300 miles of coastline, is among the most vulnerable states to sea-level rise. Two-thirds of Florida's beaches could disappear by the end of the century, says the National Wildlife Federation.

A study by the Natural Resources Defense Council ("Feeling the Heat in Florida") foresees major global warming effects, including damage to the all-important tourism industry as a result of eroding beaches and loss of coral reefs to bleaching and other afflictions. "In low-lying areas, anticipated sea-level rise could force water to flow horizontally as much as 400 feet or more inland—flooding shoreline homes and hotels and eroding Florida's famous beaches," the NRDC report says. "Attempts to block rising seas through sea-wall projects and erosion control will be expensive and will almost certainly fail to protect undeveloped shoreline."

The report also notes that saltwater encroachment could inundate coastal wetlands and affect freshwater supplies in major tourist cities. The vital citrus, sugarcane and tomato crops might also suffer from warming temperatures and less-frequent rain.

The Union of Concerned Scientists predicts a three- to 10-degree Fahrenheit rise in winter low and summer high temperatures for Florida as a whole. Northern Florida, the group says, will suffer the most from loss of soil moisture. And research by, among others, James Elsner of Florida State University, indicates that climate change amplifies hurricane intensity, one factor in a growing insurance crisis for coastal residents. When four hurricanes bashed Florida in five weeks over the summer of 2004, Swiss Re was one insurance company that took notice. "It was the first time since 1886 that we had four hurricanes affecting a single state in the same season," said Matthias Weber, a senior vice president at the company. "More than 22 percent of all homes [in Florida] were affected by at least one of the hurricanes."

When he was in office, Jeb Bush presided over a repeal of automotive emission checks, and joked about his refusal to see *An Inconvenient Truth*. But state government is no longer ignoring the problem. Under Crist's leadership, Florida is becoming the first Southern state to commit to the tough California emission standards, which link auto exhaust to global warming and require 2009 cars sold in the state to cut emissions by 25 percent. Utilities will have to reduce their emissions to 1990 levels by 2025.

Crist is taking the "Sunshine State" moniker seriously by putting solar panels on the governor's mansion in Tallahassee. In May, he signed on to the Climate Registry, working with 30 other states to measure, track and verify greenhouse gases. He's also mandating that state cars run on biofuels, and recently partnered with fellow Republican moderate Arnold Schwarzenegger of California on a climate summit held in Miami last July. At that two-day event, he said that if the state does not act soon, it faces not only a rising sea level, but also increasingly violent weather and severe droughts.

Florida has pledged to reduce its climate emissions by 80 percent of 1990 levels by 2050, and to obtain 20 percent of its energy from renewable sources (a category that, under Crist's definition, includes nuclear).

"There's gold in green," says Governor Crist's communications director, Erin Isaac. She points out that Levy County, Florida, is to play host to the largest waste wood biomass plant in the U.S., generating 75 megawatts of clean electricity and avoiding five million tons of greenhouse gas emissions (when compared to a coal plant) over 20 years.

Isaac says that Crist talked about environmental issues extensively during his winning campaign, because, she says, "climate is tied to the economy in many ways, especially in tourism and agriculture."

Florida's Public Service Commission killed what would have been the nation's largest new coal-fired power

plant last June. State residents use twice the per-capita electricity of energy-conscious Californians, and Florida utilities have done little to reduce demand. Opposition to the plant was led by Earthjustice, which called witnesses before the commission who testified that the operating utility, Florida Power & Light, could face \$400 million or more in penalties as a result of emissions from the proposed plant. In a sign of the times, a second proposed coal plant was voluntarily killed by the energy consortium that had proposed it. "There are ways of generating clean electricity without coal," Isaac says, pointing to the new biomass plant.

Delray Beach is one coastal community with a climate agenda: It has become a "Cool City." Mayor Rita Ellis points out that simply changing municipal building light bulbs from incandescent to compact fluorescent "is the equivalent of taking several hundred cars off the road."

Delray Beach spokesman Ivan Ladizinasky says, "The city has gone into green mode. You won't find too many places greener than we are." And it goes beyond talk. The city is acquiring hybrid vehicles. Beach cleanups bring out hundreds of volunteers. Ladizinasky adds, "Our city horticulturalist makes sure all our plantings are native to the region. It's good for the environment, but it's also good for Delray Beach because native plants are hardier and can withstand winds and hurricanes. And of course we're very concerned about global warming. We're flat as a pancake here. If climate change raises the sea level just one or two feet, you're talking about considerable encroachment on the shore of Delray Beach. People are very conscious of that."

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