

Climate Change: A Tale of Two Governors



In low-lying Miami, which is experiencing increasingly worse street flooding, the effects of climate change are already evident. (Photo: Flickr.)

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When Charlie Crist was Florida's attorney general and preparing to run for governor in 2005, he sat down in a private room at the Biltmore Hotel in Miami with U.S. Sen. John McCain.

McCain was gearing up to run for president. The two Republicans talked political campaigns, strategies and endorsements.

As Crist was getting ready to leave, McCain stopped him.

"Charlie, I think there is one more thing you should focus on," Crist recalled McCain saying.

"What's that?" Crist asked.

"Climate change," McCain answered. "It's a big deal."

At the time, Crist said in a recent interview, he didn't know much about the subject. But the Arizona senator piqued his interest. (McCain's office did not respond to a request for comment.)

That brief conversation in Miami would result in Florida becoming, however briefly, a pioneer in grappling with the effects of climate change — such as flooding and freshwater drinking supplies contaminated with saltwater. After

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Crist was elected governor, he convened a summit, appointed a task force and helped usher in new laws intended to address a future of climate change and rising sea levels. Crist and the Florida Legislature set goals to reduce emissions back to 1990 levels.

The effort didn't last, and in a short amount of time, the U.S. state with the most to lose from a warming planet became a global laughingstock and a symbol of the polarized debate surrounding climate

change.

Earlier this year, the [Florida Center for Investigative Reporting](#) revealed that after Gov. Rick Scott took office in 2011, state agencies told employees not to use the terms "climate change" or "global warming" in official correspondence. Emails warned staff and contractors to stay away from the terms. Environmental reports stopped including the words "climate change." One state official even refused to say those words during a committee hearing.

With no leadership from Tallahassee, the burden of dealing with climate change shifted to municipalities, where today the majority of the work to address the effects of global warming is being performed.

The success of these local programs represents a dramatic reversal, elevating Florida back to its pioneering status in confronting a changed world. In April, President Obama called a four-county collaboration on climate change in South Florida a "model" for the country.

Still, reversing course on confronting climate change has cost Florida valuable time the state needs to face a threat scientists and urban planners say is inevitable.

"If we had not seen those priorities shift, we would be in a very different place," said Jennifer Jurado, director of Broward County's Environmental Planning and Community Resilience Division.

Climate change task force



During his term as governor, Charlie Crist made dealing with climate change a priority. (Photo courtesy of Charlie Crist.)

When Crist resolved to act on climate change a decade ago, it was a different political era. The issue wasn't as partisan as it is now.

"There wasn't as much resistance to focusing on the environment as there is today," Crist said.

In 2007, his first year in office, Crist convened a national climate change summit in Miami. California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a fellow Republican, attended. Crist created the Governor's Action Team on Energy and Climate Change. The task force, in turn, canvassed research by the state's universities and presented a series of recommendations.

"Back then, Republicans in the [state] House and Senate, while not really enthusiastic, well, it didn't really bother them," Crist recalled. "So it wasn't that heavy a lift initially."

In fact, Crist was working with Schwarzenegger and another Republican governor, Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, to create an alliance of moderate Republicans concerned about climate change.

Nationally at the time, many Republicans were calling for action and proposing responses. In 2002, Sen. McCain lobbied for cap-and-trade legislation to reduce emissions. During the 2008 presidential race, climate change was part of the Republican Party platform, which pledged to take "reasonable steps today to reduce any impact on the environment." That same year, former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich recorded a public service message with Democrat Nancy Pelosi announcing the need to address climate change. In 2009, a climate change bill passed the U.S. House of Representatives.

But industry grew increasingly worried about the costs of proposed regulations.

The Petroleum Industry of America spent \$500 million fighting the 2009 bill — and won. The bill died in the U.S. Senate. Aiding them were a host of conservative think tanks and websites producing reports denying that climate change was real or man-made. Energy giants such as Exxon Mobil as well as brothers David and Charles Koch, who earned their fortune in energy sector, funded many of these efforts.

The consensus from the world's scientific community is our emissions are changing the climate and we have to act.

New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, a Democrat, is now investigating Exxon Mobil to determine if the company lied to investors about the risks of climate change.

Florida was at climate change forefront

The tenor in the country may have been changing, but in Florida, the Crist administration was moving forward with ambitious legislation.

Crist signed an executive order that would reduce Florida's greenhouse gas emissions from cars and industry so that by 2015 the state would be at 2000 levels and by 2025 at 1990 levels. Crist's executive order also mandated that statewide building codes seek a 15 percent energy-efficiency increase.

Meanwhile, Crist's task force proposed "market-based solutions" to reduce greenhouse gases — specifically cap-and-trade, which limits the emissions companies are allowed but creates a marketplace through which they can buy or trade to go over the limit.

The task force's next step was to turn those recommendations into law, and its members needed a sponsor in the House. They found one in Rep. Stan Mayfield, a Republican from Vero Beach. Mayfield was sick with cancer at the time. Nonetheless, he became an ardent champion of the bill.

"Stan was critical, being a Republican and in leadership. That was a big boost," Crist said. "He really put his heart and soul into this."

In June 2008, House Bill 7135 was signed into law, making Florida “among the forefront of state-level climate actions at the time,” said Steve Adams, director of strategic initiatives for the Washington, D.C.- and Vermont-based Institute for Sustainable Communities, a nonpartisan international nonprofit. At the time, Adams served as an energy and policy adviser to Crist.

Most significant, he said, was Crist’s work with other moderate governors to address the issue.

“For a brief shining moment there, it seemed like there was a way forward,” Adams said. “A blend of Republicans and Democrats working together on this issue.”

Mayfield lived just long enough to see his efforts turned into law. He died of his cancer in September 2008. The law he championed would die a few years later.

Climate change laws rolled back

In May 2009, Crist announced he would not to run for re-election but would try to win an open U.S. Senate seat. Rick Scott, a businessman who specialized in privatizing healthcare and ran a hospital chain convicted of a massive healthcare fraud, was elected governor in 2010. Scott won with a self-funded campaign. Crist ran for Senate as an independent against Republican Marco Rubio and lost.

Scott took office in January 2011 when the country and state were mired in recession. Dealing with climate change was not on his agenda. Instead, Scott focused on slashing the government workforce and creating tax rebates to lure businesses to the state. By then, the Tea Party movement had hardened conservative opposition to climate change.

Six months into office, Florida newspapers reported that Scott flew to a private retreat hosted by the Koch brothers. The governor did not give details about what was discussed at the retreat.

Not only was the Scott administration and the Republican-controlled legislature not interested in dealing with climate change, but they worked to roll back the laws passed during Crist’s term in office.

HB 7135 and its Senate companion were chipped away at over the next two years, according to those who worked on the bill and a review by FCIR of the amendments that undermined it.

“The collection of laws enclosed in House Bill 7135 changed almost immediately at the beginning of Gov. Scott’s first term,” said one former state official who worked on the bill and asked not to be identified. The laws were “revised piecemeal over several years, one subtle change at a time, until the intent of the bill is gutted.”

For instance, in 2011, Sen. Alan Hays, a Republican from Umatilla, sponsored legislation to repeal the cap-and-trade program in the law. A Climate Change Commission charged with implementing the new laws was disbanded and its powers transferred to the Department of Agriculture, where it is now called the Office of Energy.

By 2012, most of the key provisions of HB 7135 had been rolled back. In 2014, Crist, switching to the Democratic Party, challenged Scott for governor and lost.

Among those with an early sense that the state could not be relied on to combat the problem fast enough were representatives from some of Florida’s most populous and at-risk counties.



In 2009, county commissioners and representatives from Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and Monroe counties traveled to Washington, D.C., to talk to federal officials about the need to address the effects of climate change now. They were already dealing with street flooding and saltwater intrusion, they told federal officials.

“We agreed it would be beneficial to work regionally,” said Nichole Hefty, chief of Miami-Dade’s Office of Sustainability

In 2010, those four counties, which together make up 30 percent of the state’s population, formed the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact. The partnership, formed with bipartisan support, shares knowledge and resources to plan for a changing world.

“We decided when we formed the compact that neither the state nor the federal government were moving fast enough,” Hefty said.

Unofficial act of censorship



Sen. Alan Hays was among Florida lawmakers who helped roll back the state’s efforts to address climate change. (House photo by Mark Foley.)



Gov. Rick Scott spoke in Destin in October at an economic forum sponsored by Gulf Power, the Florida subsidiary of energy giant Southern Company. (Photo courtesy of Rick Scott.)

The decision by members of the four-county compact to forge ahead on their own proved prescient. With Scott in office, work on climate change at the state level was discouraged.

In 2011, a spokesperson for the state Department of Environmental Protection told the St. Petersburg Times (now the Tampa Bay Times): “DEP is not pursuing any programs or projects regarding climate change.”

But the reality was more troubling.

Shortly after Scott took office, an unwritten policy warned state agencies that climate change should not be addressed publicly, according to former state workers.

A former DEP lawyer told FCIR that in 2011 his supervisor announced at a staff meeting that “climate change” and “global warming” should not be used in official correspondence. A manager at the Department of Transportation said he was told at a supervisors’ meeting not to use the terms when dealing with the public.

In a 2014 email, DEP officials instructed an employee who was about to be interviewed for a documentary on sea-level rise to “make no claims as to cause.” DEP officials that year also told a man contracted to write about the threats to coral reefs not to mention climate change. The Department of Health edited out the term from a scientific paper in 2015, according to its author. Annual state reports that previously referred to climate change dropped mention of it.

An [FCIR data analysis of DEP’s website](#) found that documents containing the term “climate change” began dropping off as soon as Scott took office. In 2010, the year before Scott was inaugurated, there were 209 references to climate change in documents on the website. By March of this year, there were zero new references.

To date, no one has acknowledged initiating this quiet, unofficial act of censorship.

Gov. Scott denied there was a policy but has never explained the evidence to the contrary. Herschel Vinyard, Scott’s

DEP secretary from 2010 to 2014, declined to comment on the controversy.

Vinyard's replacement, Jonathan Steverson, who felt compelled to say "climate change" three times during an April confirmation hearing to prove there wasn't a ban, also declined to talk to FCIR.

"I'm not sure we can really speak backwards as to why the mentions dropped off, why there's emails," said Lauren Engel, DEP communications director, also new to the department.

After FCIR reported on the ban in March, President Obama gave his Earth Day address in South Florida. "Climate change can't be denied," [the president said](#) outside a visitor's center at Everglades National Park. "It can't be edited out."

Regional programs not enough

Even as state government officials hit the mute button on climate change, the four-county compact was having success addressing community issues related to our warming planet.

With millions in federal stimulus grant money, the collaboration established offices to study energy efficiencies and conservation, the impact of changes, and a host of other issues. They coordinated their projections on what sea-level rise would look like in each neighborhood and worked with the county departments to protect public infrastructure, such as those that provide water and sewer services.

They also established greenhouse gas reduction goals for each of their communities.

Members of the compact are monitoring a host of complex threats they anticipate. Increased flooding could put humans into contact with bacteria, for instance. A warmer climate may become more hospitable to diseases.



"We're looking at how weather is changing," Hefty said. "The probability of more extreme events, hurricanes, precipitation – less frequent but heavier – and drought."

The compact's work is recognized as groundbreaking. There are seven regional climate change collaboratives in the United States today. Five of them are in California. "Florida is in many respects the most advanced, most well known and admired," said Adams of the Institute for Sustainable Communities.

Yet the counties can only do so much by themselves, said Jurado, Broward's liaison to the compact. More involvement from the state and the governor is needed.

"There are many planning and management responsibilities at the state level that are not happening," she said.

Water conservation funding has been dramatically cut and state energy-efficiency goals have been eliminated. The state is not offering rebates for solar energy. There is a lack of coordinated investment on the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. And there still is not enough investment being made to grapple with saltwater intrusion into Florida's freshwater supplies.

"Those activities should be aligned at state and local levels," Jurado said. Climate change is "not a jointly held conversation."

There's no evidence to suggest Gov. Scott would even take part in that conversation.

Scott never talked about the controversial policy banning the term "climate change" in state government, other than to say there is no policy.

But in its aftermath, national and international media descended on Florida to report on the very visible effects of a warming world. Comedians mocked Florida on national television. Still, neither Scott nor anyone from his office has addressed the issue.

Instead, Florida joined 23 other states in October to sue the federal government over a plan to reduce carbon emissions nationally, claiming the law will increase electric rates.