

# As Gov. Scott Denies Ban, 'Climate Change' Order Reported at Other Agencies



Flooding in Miami Beach. Low-lying Florida is the state most susceptible to the effects of climate change. (Photo: [Flickr](#).)

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No one told Bart Bibler not to use the terms “climate change” and “global warming” during his six months on the job at the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

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Then, on March 4, he walked into a Florida Coastal Managers Forum, a teleconference with representatives from other state agencies.

When he introduced himself, Bibler congratulated everyone for the “exciting” work being done to address the impact of climate change, and then he mentioned his opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline project.

“The reaction was mostly shock,” Bibler said. According to Bibler, the forum moderator, Ann Lazar, said she hoped his advocacy on the conference call wouldn’t result in cancellations of future ones.

“Obviously, she’s nervous I had violated this unwritten policy of talking about climate change,” Bibler said. “I didn’t get

the memo.”

Lazar declined to comment.

DEP officials put Bibler on a two-day leave. The letter of reprimand chastised him for expressing his personal views about the pipeline. It also stated that a summary of the meeting Bibler supplied to his supervisor “gave the appearance that this was Ann’s official meeting agenda that included climate change.”

“It is not true that he was put on leave for bringing up climate, just like it is not true that we have a policy banning the use of the term climate change,” said Lauren Engel, DEP spokesperson.

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The Florida Center for Investigative Reporting first reported Sunday that Gov. Rick Scott’s administration ordered DEP employees, contractors and volunteers not to use the terms “climate change” and “global warming” in official communications.

Scott’s office and a DEP spokesperson told FCIR that there is no policy on this. After FCIR’s story was published, Scott told reporters in Miami: “It’s not true.”

Jerry Phillips, a former DEP attorney who runs the Florida chapter of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, said he’s received more than a dozen complaints from DEP employees on this topic over the past five years.

“The complaints have been that if climate change projects can be put on the back burner, that’s what the administration would want to have happen,” he said. “The level of fear, in my opinion, is at an all-time high at the DEP. In general, they feel they are being muzzled and cannot do their jobs.”

On Tuesday, Ralph Wilson, with the environmental group Forecast the Facts, filed a complaint with the DEP’s inspector general office.

Now, employees from other state agencies have come forward to FCIR to confirm the unofficial policy not to use these terms.

Bill Taylor was the assistant district right of way manager for the Florida Department of Transportation’s District 4 office in Fort Lauderdale. He retired last year after 19 years with the DOT. He said he was told not to use certain terms during a meeting of district managers.

“It was at a routine meeting in probably 2012 or 2013,” Taylor said. “At one point, it was mentioned very casually that in our future dealings with the public, we were not to use the terms ‘climate change’ or ‘global warming.’ But it was OK to talk about sea-level rise, because for some projects that had to be taken into consideration.”

“DOT has no such policy,” spokesman Dick Kane said. The department has worked with universities and communities to study sea-level rise, he added.

In an episode at the Florida Department of Health this year, first reported in the Washington Post Tuesday, an epidemiologist was told to remove all instances of “climate change” from a study on ciguatera poisoning in Florida.

Elizabeth Radke, who was writing the paper as a chapter in her PhD dissertation at the University of Florida, collaborated with a DOH employee for the study. As a result, it had to be reviewed by DOH officials in Tallahassee.

“The last round of revisions were sent at the end of January,” Radke told FCIR. “Each reference to climate change was underlined and the reason why was explained to me verbally.” She had to delete the words.

In January, the Tampa Bay Times reported on a DOH grant program “to explore the health impacts of a warming



Gov. Rick Scott (Photo courtesy of Gov. Scott.)

world.” A DOH spokesperson “was careful to avoid using the term ‘climate change’ in explaining its goals,” the Times reported. Instead, she said it’s focused on “health effects related to weather events.”

“It is not true; there is no such policy at the department of health,” Nathan Dunn, a DOH spokesman said and referred to a January press release that included the term “climate change.”

At the South Florida Water Management District, a former employee said that terms like “climate change” and “global warming” were never used in documents. “It was widely known that you couldn’t put those words into a report, said the former employee, who asked not to be identified because of an ongoing relationship with the agency. “They just wouldn’t make it through the editing process.”

The unofficial policy not to use the terms climate change and global warming seems to have created a censorship system that is somewhat porous. State documents are still being produced with those terms — but their use has decreased dramatically.

FCIR conducted a year-by-year keyword analysis of PDF files on DEP’s public website — which included reports, agendas, correspondence and other communications. The analysis shows a steep decline in the use of the term “climate change” after Scott took office.

In 2010, Gov. Charlie Crist’s final year in office, DEP’s website hosted 20 documents that contained a total of 209 references to “climate change.” The next year, Scott’s first in office, the numbers declined to 15 documents and 123 total references.

That decline has continued through Scott’s tenure as governor. Last year, there were 16 documents with a total of 34 references to “climate change.” All those documents were from other agencies, except for a DEP quick reference phone list guide that listed “climate change” as a subject, and a number to call at the Office of Business Planning. There have been no documents added so far this year that use the term climate change.

FCIR’s analysis, which is preliminary, used Google Search and Adobe Acrobat and included only PDF documents. The documents were searched for keywords, not analyzed for content, context or authorship.

*Grant Smith of FCIR contributed data analysis to this report.*