

In ‘Climate Change’ Controversy, A Tale of Two Agencies



Dr. Thomas Eason speaks during a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission meeting in Jacksonville in February. (Photo by Tim Donovan/FWC.)

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Florida Center for Investigative Reporting

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission has a steering committee to address climate change. The commission maintains computer modeling programs that show how climate change will affect water and land crucial to wildlife. It holds regular seminars to educate staff on the latest climate science.

On its website, the commission has a [“Climate Change 101”](#) page that addresses key challenges the state faces.

Eight miles from the state commission’s Tallahassee headquarters, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which bills itself as the state’s “lead agency for environmental management and stewardship,” states that it is only monitoring sea-level rise. That is its sole effort to address climate change.

As Florida Center for Investigative Reporting [first reported](#), the emphasis on “climate change” within the DEP has declined over the past five years during Gov. Rick Scott’s tenure in office. For instance, a webpage titled “Climate Change and Coral Reefs” hasn’t been updated since November 18, 2011 — the year Scott took office. That was also the year a DEP spokesperson told the [Tampa Bay Times](#) that “DEP is not pursuing any programs or projects regarding climate change.”

One likely explanation for the different priorities at the two agencies is that FWC, created by voters in 1999 as an independent commission and run by an autonomous board, does not answer to the governor. The DEP, on the other hand, does report to the governor’s office.

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Prior to Scott's election, DEP was aggressively studying climate change. When Scott, a climate change skeptic, took office in 2011, the terms "climate change" and "global warming" began to disappear from DEP reports, according to a previous analysis by FCIR. Former DEP employees recounted to FCIR meetings where they were ordered not to use the terms. In emails, DEP

officials instructed employees and volunteers to stay away from the subject.

Scott and DEP officials have denied the existence of any policy prohibiting the terms, but they have never attempted to explain or dispute FCIR's findings.

In contrast, FWC's freedom to tackle the subject indicates a degree of independence from Tallahassee politics and shows how effective a state agency can be when freed to do its job.

"We've been working on climate change for a while," said Thomas Eason, director of FWC's division on habitat and species conservation.

He acknowledges that it hasn't always been an easy subject to address.

"We learned pretty early on that using the phrase 'climate change' just created such friction, and got in the way of getting the work done," Eason said. "So early on we experimented with using different terms, like 'climate variability,' then settled in to 'adaptation to climate.'"

A review of the commission's literature found the term climate change still widely used.

"We started to dig in heavily in 2007," Eason said, when FWC hosted a summit titled "Florida's Wildlife: On the Front Line of Climate Change" and created a climate change coordinator position.

"The FWC was, and still is, doing cutting-edge work on adaptation planning," said Doug Parsons, the commission's first climate change coordinator who held the position for four years. He left in 2011 to work as climate change liaison for the National Park Service. Today, he works for the Society for Conservation Biology as the North American policy director.

"They (FWC) are regularly invited to share their work nationally," he said. "They've been very effective in working with local partners too, since a lot of interesting things are happening at the city and county level in Florida."

In addition to ongoing seminars to familiarize staff with the latest climate science, FWC modified a computer simulation program to examine the impact of water rise in wetlands in the Keys. The Sea Level Affecting Marshes

Model, known by the acronym SLAMM, is available to communities as they take climate change into account in future development.

“We’re using it within the planning process,” said Jason Evans, an environmental scientist with Stetson University, in DeLand, who is helping Monroe County develop a climate and sustainability plan. “It has proved useful.” Evans said that “FWC is at the forefront” when it comes to state agencies providing helpful science to communities.

With 2,100 employees and a \$364 million budget, FWC is much smaller than DEP, which has 3,100 employees and a \$1.6 billion budget. Its scope of duties is also narrower. FWC is charged with protecting and managing Florida’s wildlife and their habitats, while DEP regulates environmental policies, monitors air, land and water quality, and is in charge of “ecosystem restoration.”

When FCIR asked DEP officials for current climate change initiatives, the department cited ongoing monitoring of sea-level rise, including a sea-level rise working group, a sea-level rise pilot project monitoring two communities, and the inclusion of sea-level rise estimates in a 20-year projection of community water needs. The department declined to make anyone available for comment.

But the effects of climate change in Florida will amount to more than rising water. Increased temperatures will make people more vulnerable to heat stroke and asthma-related illnesses. Precipitation may become more infrequent but intense, and as different animal and insect populations change, new pest control issues will arise.

“In an area like the Keys, FWC’s data and tools have been critical,” said Erin Deady, an environmental lawyer who consults with local governments on climate change. “We don’t have the resources the state has, so we’re hoping to keep building partnerships with state agencies as they wrap their arms around this issue.”