

'A job incomplete': Florida's statewide climate change response ignores root cause

March 9 2022, by Alex Harris



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Despite years of warnings from top scientists around the world, Florida's plan to address climate change only involves spending money to adapt to rising seas instead of cutting the emissions that cause them. In fact, the

state has passed bills that work against those goals.

"You can't do one without the other. When you do one without the other, it kind of negates the impact. It's a job incomplete," said Jonathan Webber, deputy director of environmental advocacy group Florida Conservation Voters.

A recent exchange between two state representatives over the future of Florida's latest Chief Resilience Officer, the person in charge of the state's response to [climate change](#), underscores the dissonance.

Moments before the unanimous passage last week of a bill that would create an office and staff for the state's resilience officer, Rep. Ben Diamond, a Democrat representing St. Petersburg, suggested an amendment that would also ask the CRO to research the best methods to reduce emissions in the state.

If the world doesn't stop emitting [greenhouse gasses](#) quickly, the planet could lose its chance to keep global warming to a manageable level, which could be devastating for the Sunshine State's economy and environment, climate experts say.

"Unless we're charging our CRO with developing some policies about how we're going to turn the tide back on these problems, we are not fully tackling this issue head-on," he said.

The bill's sponsor, Miami-Dade area Republican Rep. Demi Busatta Cabrera, shot down Diamond's amendment.

"It doesn't resolve real issues and I refuse to politicize this issue. Floridians don't care about us scoring political points. They don't care about what words we use, they care about action. They care about real results, and that's what the bill does. And this amendment would hinder

that," she said.

The bill passed without the amendment, but with Diamond's vote. He told the Miami Herald he was disappointed in that outcome but not surprised. He's suggested bills for years that would create a climate task force to examine the impact of climate change on the state, and other Democrats have pushed for bills that would force the state to stop burning fossil fuels and switch to renewable energy. None of them have ever been heard in a single committee.

"The reason why I'm so frustrated is this issue is so much more serious than adapting to flooding," he said. "We can't adapt our way out of climate change."

Flood protection vs 'left-wing stuff'

The last time Florida's Legislature addressed the root cause of climate change—[greenhouse gas emissions](#)—it was in a law that effectively blocked cities from cutting emissions.

Last year, Florida passed a law written by natural gas companies that prevented cities from banning the use of natural gas, a policy sweeping the country as part of a nationwide movement to cut emissions. Natural gas, which provides about 70% of the state's fuel at power plants and is also used in some homes for heating and cooking, is made of methane gas, which heats the atmosphere much more than carbon dioxide does.

The new law undercut cities' ability to meet the goals they set to get to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, a goal named by the United Nations to avoid the worst impacts of global warming.

Although Florida has all but ignored climate change mitigation, the state has recently dedicated hundreds of millions toward helping local

governments afford the critical upgrades they need to survive rising tides.

In the last few months, Florida gave more than \$670 million in federal and state money to cities to raise roads, floodproof buildings and convert leaky polluted septic tanks to sewer pipes.

But none of that money is dedicated toward projects that encourage renewable energy, building efficiency or any other method for cutting emissions. Gov. Ron DeSantis, in a news conference announcing the first wave of state funding, dismissed such policies as "left-wing stuff."

"What I've found is when people start talking about things like global warming they typically use that as a pretext to do a bunch of left-wing things that they would want to do anyways," he said.

At the second news conference, when a Miami Herald reporter asked DeSantis about the state's plans to address greenhouses gasses, he did not answer. Instead, he talked about how hurricanes have long been an issue that plagued Florida.

"We're not going to be able to stop being vulnerable," he said. "We're going to mitigate what Mother Nature is throwing at us."

Three chief resilience officers in three years

The governor's office did not respond to requests for comment about how the state is tackling climate change or make the current chief resilience officer, Wesley Brooks, a former staffer of Sen. Marco Rubio, available for an interview. Brooks has not done an interview with any media outlet since his appointment in November.

DeSantis named Florida's first chief resilience officer, Julia Nesheiwat,

when he first took office. In the six months she was there, Nesheiwat produced a report that outlined a need for more state funding for local drainage projects, but didn't mention emissions.

After Nesheiwat left in early 2020, the position was assigned to the head of the Department of Environmental Protection until Brooks was named in November.

"The CRO position is emblematic of the governor's thinking on this issue. He's not taking it totally seriously," Webber said. "It's a half-baked idea, to begin with. The Legislature is now trying to flesh it out and leaving out the most important part of resiliency."

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Citation: 'A job incomplete': Florida's statewide climate change response ignores root cause (2022, March 9) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-03-job-incomplete-florida-statewide-climate.html>

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