

Florida the only state to turn down millions to lessen emissions, feds say

December 18 2023, by Jack Prator and Max Chesnes, Tampa Bay Times



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Congress in 2021 provided \$6.4 billion to states to curb tailpipe emissions and reduce the effects of climate change.

Florida was set to receive \$320 million, the third most of any state.

The state Department of Transportation began drafting a plan to add trucker parking at rest stops, which staff said could fix the statewide shortage that kept drivers on the road longer, polluting more, as they searched for a place to stop.

The plan also suggested spending the money on things like electric buses and roundabouts, which reduce the amount of time idling cars sputter out climate-warming emissions at traffic lights.

But last month, the department secretary, Jared Perdue, sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Transportation declining participation in the federal program.

Perdue said in the letter that the program was an example of government overreach that was "the continued politicization of our roadways," echoing statements made by Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has said that climate change is "politicization of the weather."

Florida now stands alone as the only state to say it would turn down the money, federal officials told the Tampa Bay Times. Any mention of the plan was wiped from the state's website.

When asked about the removal of the draft documents, a spokesperson for the agency said it took them down after the department's decision to decline participation in the program.

Even Texas, whose governor often tries to outshine DeSantis on conservative credentials, plans to take its share of \$641 million, officials there told the Times.

Environmental experts and some lawmakers say the Florida transportation department's refusal to take the funding is a flawed decision.

"This is going to be so costly for Florida families and businesses in a growing, dynamic state where we need better transportation," said U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor, D-Tampa.

The congresswoman told the Times the move is "fiscally irresponsible" and that "Florida looks foolish" to other lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

"We need new leadership at the state level that's not going to send our hard-earned tax dollars back to Washington," she said.

At least one local Republican lawmaker agreed with the decision to refuse the money. Rep. Laurel Lee, R-Brandon, said accepting the funds would require the state agency to conform to "unrealistic and unfeasible goals."

"The Biden Administration continues to push an overreaching climate agenda on states through unconstitutional regulation and rule making," she wrote in a statement to the Times. "The (Environmental Protection Agency's) efforts to force electric vehicles do not meet the transportation needs or budgets of Florida families."

The state transportation department's "Carbon Reduction Quick Guide," which outlined the plan for the [federal money](#) to go toward emission-cutting measures, was available online as late as November. A handful of news outlets had linked to it before its removal.

After speaking with the Times, the Florida transportation department published Perdue's letter Wednesday morning on their site, replacing the dead link to the deleted draft plan. That draft plan is still accessible on internet archives.

"For transparency and with the decision made to not submit a document for this program, our website was updated to reflect the latest and most

up-to-date information, which is why it was replaced with Secretary Perdue's letter," spokesperson Jessica Ottaviano said.

Rather than accepting the federal money, Perdue wrote in the letter that Florida would focus on building roads and bridges, "not reducing carbon emissions."

While Perdue downplayed climate risks in his letter, the now-deleted documents from within his own agency emphasized bracing "for current and future impacts of climate change."

Perdue cited state data when he claimed Florida has the cleanest air on record, "with emissions continuing to fall as fast as our state grows." Yet according to the department he oversees, Florida ranks among the 15 states with the highest levels of diesel emissions. The report with that statistic also appears to have been removed from the department's website.

The data Perdue cited shows decreases in a handful of air pollutants. But the report did not include a measurement of carbon dioxide, of which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will require "continuous measurement and reporting" starting early next year.

Prior to opting out, the department had pinpointed trucker parking as a good use of the federal money. In 2019, 682 million tons of freight were hauled in Florida, the department noted. Nationwide, 98% of drivers reported nearly an extra hour of drive time looking for parking. The more time truckers search for parking, the more they burn fossil fuels.

"Truck parking needs in Florida exceed capacity throughout the state with truckers driving further and longer specifically in search of safe parking," the department noted in its now-deleted plan.

The Florida Department of Transportation also said average commute times have grown in Florida by 11% over the last decade. About 40% of congestion and traffic volume issues in the state are due to roadway capacity. The department also noted that only about 0.5% of Florida's total motor vehicle registrations are for [electric vehicles](#).

The deadline to accept the funds passed Nov. 15. As of Thursday, no other state had informed the Federal Highway Administration that it would decline the money, a spokesperson for the federal transportation agency told the Times.

Money to pay for the new program comes from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed in November 2021 and makes \$6.4 billion in federal funds available over five years across the country. The bill was passed largely along party lines, with just 13 House Republicans crossing the aisle. Only California and Texas were to get more money than Florida.

Texas will use the federal funds for congestion management, public transportation, truck parking and other projects, said Adam Hammons, a spokesperson for the Texas transportation agency.

Texas and Florida have been prominent laboratories of conservative policymaking, led by two ambitious governors who have competed for the national spotlight. Both states are vulnerable to sea rise spurred by climate change.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the Florida Department of Transportation said Perdue's letter speaks for itself and said federal transportation officials have failed to provide guidance for the program, including an effective way to verify emissions reductions.

"Conducting business in this way is irresponsible and Florida cannot

commit to a program that has unclear obligations," spokesperson Michael Williams said in the statement.

"While (the Florida Department of Transportation) began the process of coordinating with stakeholders and drafting a document, we ultimately made the decision to not submit the plan without having clear guidance," Williams said.

The state agency pushed back against the federal department's statement to the Times that it had declined the funding, instead saying the state has offered to have further conversations with [federal officials](#) but has not heard back. Federal officials told the Times they plan to respond to Perdue's letter.

A handful of environmental groups, including local chapters of the Sierra Club and the Environmental Defense Fund, object to Florida's decision.

State Rep. Lindsay Cross, D-St. Petersburg, said the decision harms the state in ways beyond air quality. Cross, who is an environmental scientist, said that pollutants from vehicle emissions make up about half of stormwater runoff.

"Emissions from vehicles are not only a significant contribution to carbon pollution, but also to nitrogen pollution and to water quality," she said.

Ali DySard, senior policy specialist at the Florida office of the Environmental Defense Fund, said transportation makes up half of the state's pollution emissions.

"There's overwhelming bipartisan support for keeping Florida healthy, and keeping our air good and keeping our residents prosperous," she

said. "This funding really would have helped that."

DeSantis vetoed a bill in July that would have lowered the costs of electric cars for government agencies that bought the vehicles for their fleets. DySard's organization calculated that the governor's decision cost the state \$8.7 billion in savings. The state transportation department's recent decision to opt out of the federal program presents a similar outcome, she said.

DySard said Florida could begin to lag compared to other [states](#) when it comes to moving away from fossil fuels.

The state official responsible for overseeing Florida's response to climate change, chief resilience officer Wesley Brooks, didn't reply to multiple requests from the Times asking if he agrees with the state's decisions to turn down the climate money. Similar questions submitted to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, which regulates polluters, were redirected to the governor's office, which then referred to Perdue's letter.

When contacted by the Times, several members of Florida's Republican congressional delegation didn't immediately respond either. They include: Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla.; Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla.; Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor; Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Sarasota; Rep. Anna Paulina Luna, R-St. Petersburg; and Rep. Brian Mast, R-Treasure Coast.

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Citation: Florida the only state to turn down millions to lessen emissions, feds say (2023, December 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-12-florida-state-millions-lesser-emissions.html>

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