

GOP leaders in Fla. dismiss risks to state of rising sea levels

Efforts to address climate change seen as alarmist

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Activists and beachgoers in Miami Beach last month protested statements made by Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who has criticized predictions about global warming. LYNNE SLADKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE

MIAMI BEACH — On a recent afternoon, Scott McKenzie watched torrential rains and a murky tide swallow the street outside his dog-grooming salon. Within minutes, much of this stretch of chic South Beach was flooded ankle-deep in a fetid mix of rain and sea.

“Welcome to the new Venice,” McKenzie joked as salt water surged from the sewers.

There are few places in the nation more vulnerable to rising sea levels than low-lying South Florida, a tourist and retirement mecca built on drained swampland.

Yet as other coastal states and the Obama administration take aggressive measures to battle the effects of global warming, Florida's top Republican politicians are challenging the science and balking at government fixes.

Among the chief skeptics are US Senator Marco Rubio and former governor Jeb Bush, both possible presidential candidates in 2016. Governor Rick Scott, who is running for reelection, has worked with the Republican-controlled Legislature to dismantle Florida's fledgling climate change initiatives. They were put into place by his predecessor and current opponent, Democrat Charlie Crist.

"I'm not a scientist," Scott said, after a federal report pinpointed Florida — and Miami in particular — as among the country's most at-risk areas.

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He and other Republicans warn against what they see as alarmist policies that could derail the country's tenuous economic recovery.

Their positions could affect their political fortunes.

Democrats plan to place climate change, and the GOP's skepticism, front and center in a state where the issue is no longer an abstraction.

Their hope is to win over independents and siphon some Republicans, who are deeply divided over global warming. Tom Steyer, a billionaire environmental activist, has pledged to spend \$100 million this year to influence seven critical contests nationwide, including the Florida governor's race.

The battle in the country's largest swing state offers a preview of what could be a pivotal fight in the next presidential election.

Crist is running for his old job as a Democrat, criticizing Scott and Florida Republicans for reversing his efforts to curb global warming. "They don't believe in science. That's ridiculous," Crist said at a recent campaign rally in Miami.

Nationally, the issue could prove tricky for Democrats.

Polls show a bipartisan majority of Americans favor measures to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gases, such as the new federal rule to limit carbon emissions from power plants. But they routinely rank climate change far behind the economy, the centerpiece of Scott's campaign, when prioritizing issues.

"This is not a future problem. It's a current problem," said Leonard Berry, director of the Florida Center for Environmental Studies at Florida Atlantic University and a contributing author of the National Climate Assessment, which found that sea levels have risen about 8 inches in the past century.

Miami Beach is expected to spend \$400 million on an elaborate pumping system to cope with routine flooding. To the north, Fort Lauderdale has shelled out millions to restore beaches and a section of coastal highway after Hurricane Sandy and other storms breached the city's concrete sea wall.

Florida lacks a statewide approach to the effects of climate change, although just a few years ago, it was at the forefront on the issue.

In 2007, Crist, then a Republican, declared global warming “one of the most important issues that we will face this century,” signed executive orders to tighten tailpipe emission standards for cars and opposed coal-fired power plants.

Bush, his predecessor, had pushed the state to diversify its energy mix and prioritize conservation.

With little opposition, the GOP-led Legislature passed a bill that laid the groundwork for a California-style cap-and-trade system to cut carbon emissions.

But the efforts sputtered as the economy collapsed and Crist and Rubio faced off in a divisive 2010 Republican primary for US Senate.

Although Rubio had voted for Crist’s landmark environmental measure as a state legislator, he soon hammered the governor for what he called a “cap-and-trade scheme.” Seeking support from the growing Tea Party movement, he distanced himself from the vote.

Rubio also began to voice doubts about whether climate change is man-made, a doubt he shares with Bush. Both have stuck to that position.