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## PowerPost Analysis

# The Energy 202: Florida Republicans have added the words 'climate change' to their vocabularies — and to legislation

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By [Meryl Kornfield](#)

## THE LIGHTBULB

**TALLAHASSEE — Florida Rep. Chris Sprowls, a Republican, declared it so in September 2019 at a speech designating him the next speaker of the House: “We need to stop being afraid of words like ‘climate change’ and ‘sea level rise.’”** And Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has used the term repeatedly since his campaign for the job in 2018, even saying it three times in a news release that announced a new statewide job, chief resilience officer, tasked with preparing Florida for sea level rise.

**After years of the GOP dismissing scientists who say the planet is warming, Republicans in Florida, one of the states vulnerable to rising seas and extreme weather events such as hurricanes, are becoming increasingly comfortable with talking about the changing climate.**

**DeSantis’s office said it does not see a downside to using “the term ‘climate change’ or any other term.”**

**“As it pertains to Florida’s environment, the focus is and will remain solely on solutions,” a spokesman for the governor told The Energy 202.** He listed steps the governor has taken while in office to mitigate pollution, including funding \$625 million toward water quality and restoration of the Everglades National Park, reaching an agreement to purchase 20,000 acres of wetlands intended for oil drilling.

The governor has also created offices for environmental accountability and transparency as well as coastal protection.

**And in a departure from the past, more bills with the phrase “climate change” have been filed this year in the Florida legislature than in the previous decade, according to an analysis by The Energy 202.**

“I thought he showed real political courage in those remarks,” Rep. Ben Diamond (D), the minority leader-in-waiting said of Sprowls’s speech. “We're certainly in a far better place than we were under the [previous Gov. Rick] Scott administration because we're now having the discussions.”

The rhetorical shift by Florida Republicans on climate change [mirrors one happening in Washington](#), where top GOP officials are preparing their own climate legislation in response to concerns from young Republicans the party is ignoring the issue. But Republicans who want to tackle climate change are at odds with the Trump administration, which has backpedaled on the issue as the president has withdrawn the country from the Paris climate accords after calling climate change a “hoax,” and rolling back regulations to reduce carbon emissions that contribute to a warming planet.

In Florida, the GOP’s apparent new openness in acknowledging the Earth is getting hotter is a sea change from just a few years ago.

Scott, now a U.S. senator, made [national headlines](#) for allegedly banning the words climate change and sea level rise from use by the state’s Department of Environmental Protection. [In 2015, scientists working for the department told reporters it was an unwritten policy under Scott not to use the term climate change.](#)

At the time, the policy became ammunition for the state’s Democrats. Former senator Jeff Clemens mocked Bryan Koon, Scott’s emergency management chief, when he testified in front of Clemens’s committee and avoided the C-words. Clemens [jokingly suggested](#), “maybe as a state we use ‘atmospheric re-employment,’ That might be something the governor can get behind.”

Scott denies ever banning the words, and his office defended his environmental record as governor.

**“As we’ve said many times, the claim that there was any policy banning the term climate change is laughably false and was never based on any actual evidence,” Chris Hartline, Scott’s spokesman, told The Energy 202.**

Hartline cited budget items Scott approved that put millions toward programs including flood mitigation, beach renourishment and coral reef protection.

**“Senator Scott is glad the DeSantis administration is continuing his work to protect Florida’s natural treasures for generations to come,” Hartline added.**

When Hurricane Dorian was barreling toward his Florida last year, Scott was asked by [Fox News’s Sunday host Chris Wallace](#) whether he believed there was a connection between climate change and hurricane intensity. Scott answered that “the climate's changing” and “our storms seem to be getting bigger,” but he said “we don't know what the cause is.”

It hasn't just become a political priority to acknowledge climate change: In Florida, the consequences of sea level rise are significantly greater than in other states.

Even at a committee meeting last week for a Florida House bill to require publicly funded construction projects along the coast evaluate sea level rise, Republicans doubled down on the significance of the state's geography.

**“Florida is going to be seeing the effects of climate change long before a lot of other parts of this country,” state Rep. Vance Aloupis, a Republican representing part of Miami and bill sponsor, told lawmakers. “What we do will be an example for many other parts of this nation.”**

Politico's environment and energy reporter Bruce Ritchie, who reported on the exchange, [tweeted](#) he hadn't “heard any recognition of sea level rise like this in the Florida House in the 12 years” he has covered Tallahassee.

Sprowls said conservatives need to stop confusing “acknowledging a problem with acquiescing to a particular solution.”

**While other Republican-controlled states, including Texas and South Carolina, have tiptoed around terms like climate change in their proposals for federal disaster dollars, Florida hasn't, [the New York Times](#) found.**

In a draft proposal for \$633 million from a federal program, Florida officials [wrote](#) that “climate change is a key overarching challenge which threatens to compound the extent and effects of hazards.”

Former Florida Republican congressman Carlos Curbelo [told](#) my colleague Jackie Alemany the state “is the avant-garde of the party” because climate change is a local issue.

“Florida is a state where the environment is top of mind for most voters,” he said.

Of 1,045 Floridians surveyed by [Florida Atlantic University](#) in October, 56 percent agreed climate change is real and caused by people, including 44 percent of Republicans and 70 percent of Democrats.

Both Diamond and Sprowls's districts are in one of the [most vulnerable metropolitan areas in the world](#) to a major hurricane. Their constituents live near Tampa Bay, where waters could rise up to 8.5 feet above today's sea level in the next century, the Tampa Bay Times [reported](#).

**Diamond, a top Democrat in the Florida House, is optimistic about passing his own climate bill because of the growing support from the other side of the aisle.**

After no success last year, Diamond reintroduced the legislation with a Republican sponsor this year. The bill would create a program within the state's Department for Environmental Protection that produces a resiliency plan for sea level rise every four years.

After November, Sprowls will begin work as speaker, and one of his priorities is finding a way to acquire more data on sea level rise. With data, lawmakers can make informed decisions about where to focus funding and resources, he said.

“We spend so much time on the hyper-politicization of climate change and these words like ‘sea level rise’ that we stopped looking for the common-sense things that we need to do to protect our community,” he said. “Say the word, don't say the word. Let's tackle the problem.”