

In Depth



Oakley and Casey Jones, tourists from Idaho Falls, navigate the flooded streets of Miami Beach as they try to make their way to their hotel on Collins Ave and 30th Street during a King Tide on Sept. 28, 2015.

EMILY BECHTOLD miamiherald.com

Curbelo, Ros-Lehtinen join Deutch in effort to fight climate change

GOP Rep. Carlos Curbelo, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Democratic Rep. Ted Deutch lead bipartisan effort

5. Florida, seeing effects of sea-level rise, at 'clear threat'

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WASHINGTON
Republican Rep. Carlos Curbelo and Democratic Rep. Ted Deutch, whose South Florida districts are already enduring increased flooding, salt water intrusion and other effects of rising sea levels, are leading the first truly bipartisan congressional effort to tackle climate change.

Joined by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Miami Republican, they've formed a caucus that uses an unusual "buddy system" in which each Democratic member must bring along a Republican colleague willing to renounce party orthodoxy and stop minimizing the peril — or even existence — of global warming.

Deutch, a third-term Democrat from Boca Raton, spoke Thursday at the third Sea-Level Rise Summit in Fort Lauderdale, which was sponsored by Florida Atlantic University's Center for Environmental Studies and drew leading climate change experts.

"For too long in Washington, we've been unable to have a bipartisan discussion around climate change," Deutch told the gathering. "But in South Florida, where the rate of sea-level rise outpaces the global rate tenfold, and where the high water mark jumps one inch each year, our local governments and our business leaders recognize we must act for the benefit of our environment and for the benefit of our economy."

"Our bipartisan Climate Solutions Caucus is finally

giving Washington the opportunity to do the same," he said.

Curbelo, a Cuban-American Republican from Miami in his first House term, sounded similar themes in an interview before the conference.

"It's an issue where there should be bipartisan consensus," Curbelo told McClatchy. "It's a clear threat to our viability here in South Florida. People in government should be focused on solving problems, improving the quality of life and protecting people."

Conspicuously absent from the congressional caucus so far is Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a Miami Republican who declined to say whether he planned to join the group.

At its first meeting last month, caucus members heard from New Zealand Climate Change Minister Paula Bennett and from an executive with Statoil, a large Norwegian oil and natural gas company.

Harold Wanless, a University of Miami geologist who's consulting with Curbelo and Deutch as co-founders of the caucus, puts the current danger in stark terms.

"Miami Beach, Miami and the rest of South Florida have become the poster child for climate change because it has huge assets that will be lost with just two or three feet of further sea-level rise," he said.

"Right now we have a huge amount of condos being built in South Florida with no regard for sea rise. A lot of people are going to lose out big."

The ocean that many of the condos overlook will rise between 4.1 and 6.6



Curbelo



Ros-Lehtinen



Deutch

feet by the end of the century, according to projections from government scientists.

"We have to stop putting greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, period," he said. "People are finally realizing that we've really messed up."

Ros-Lehtinen, in her 14th term and dean of Florida's congressional delegation, takes a more hopeful view.

"If we are thoughtful and prepared, our collective response to rising sea levels, from Washington to Miami, has the potential to make South Florida a global leader and a model for climate adaptation and mitigation," she said.

More than other low-lying cities around the globe, Miami is threatened because it is built on limestone, an unusually permeable foundation.

"It's a big problem," said Colin Polsky, who organized the Fort Lauderdale conference as head of FAU's environmental studies center. "It puts us in another category of risk compared to New Orleans or the Netherlands or London or New York. They have their sea-level-rise challenges, but here we have porous limestone that is permitting the water to come in from below as well as over the top, so it's a

double whammy."

Rep. Patrick Murphy of Jupiter, who's running for the Senate, is one of six Democrats in the caucus.

"When I'm traveling the state — whether it's the die-off of seagrass in the Florida Keys, disappearing oysters in Apalachicola Bay, or the toxic waters in the Indian River Lagoon in my backyard — the effects of climate change cannot be ignored," Murphy said. "The clock is ticking on getting this right."

But for Curbelo, Ros-Lehtinen and four other GOP House members from Illinois, Pennsylvania and New York, participating in the caucus requires them to break party ranks in no longer denying that global warming is caused by human activity — or that it even is taking place.

In recent months, Republican presidential candidates appeared to compete with one another in seeing who could mock climate change the most.

"I don't have a plan to influence the weather," Sen. Marco Rubio, who grew up in the Miami area, quipped at a town hall meeting in New Hampshire.

"It wouldn't be on my first page of things that I'd want to do in the middle of the night in a cold sweat," former Gov. Jeb Bush, who lives in the Miami suburb of Coral Gables, said elsewhere in the Granite State.

Billionaire businessman

Donald Trump, now the presumptive Republican nominee, said: "[President Barack] Obama thinks it's the No. 1 problem of the world today. And I think it's very low on the list."

In defiance of overwhelming statistical evidence, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas said there's been "no significant warming whatsoever for the last 18 years." Former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania went so far as to call climate change a "hoax."

It's these type of strong political headwinds that make some environmentalists skeptical of the new bipartisan climate change caucus.

"I can't think of the next Republican [lawmaker] who will join even this modest effort to educate each other on climate change," said Melinda Pierce, national legislative director for the Sierra Club. "For some of these Republicans, I worry that this caucus is their political cover. What matters most are their votes."

While Pierce acknowledges that Curbelo and Ros-Lehtinen have "voted pro-climate a handful of times," she points to their overall lifetime ratings by the League of Conservation Voters — 23 percent for Curbelo, 33 percent for Ros-Lehtinen.

Those figures are higher than for many other Republican lawmakers, but lower than most Democrats' scores.

A concrete comparison of two competing House measures illustrates the problem.

Rep. Chris Gibson, a New York Republican who joined the new climate caucus, is pushing a seemingly noncontroversial resolution that states in part: "If left unaddressed, the consequences of a changing climate have the potential to adversely impact all Americans."

Yet in the eight months since Gibson introduced it, the measure has gained only 12 GOP cosponsors, among them Curbelo and Ros-Lehtinen.

By contrast, a resolution by Republican Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana opposing a carbon tax, which many scientists and environmentalists believe would be the quickest way to cut greenhouse emissions, has 75 cosponsors. All of them are Republicans, including Reps. Gus Bilirakis and Bill Posey of Florida.

Bilirakis and Posey both live on water's edge — Bilirakis in Pinellas County on the Gulf Coast, Posey in Brevard County's Rockledge on the Atlantic.

Even for the Republicans who've already joined the Curbelo-Deutch caucus, climate change still seems like a touchy subject.

For instance, news releases this year from Rep. Ryan Costello, a Pennsylvania Republican in the group, trumpet bipartisan House initiatives on "the heroin epidemic," on "sophisticated digital-age security threats," and on the need to develop "21st Century Skills," but there is no release about the climate change caucus.

Among the six GOP lawmakers in the group, Rep. Bob Dold of Illinois was the only one who responded to requests to discuss his role in it. Yet even his comments referred generally to environmental protection and did not mention climate change.

"As an Eagle Scout and the representative of a district that borders Lake Michigan, I know firsthand why we must all work together on policies that keep our water and air clean," he said. "Protecting the environment is not a partisan measure, which is why we are working to find a sensible path forward that improves our planet for future generations."