

# BloombergView

CLIMATE CHANGE

## Florida's Political Climate Change

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By The Editors

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Adapting to climate change is such a daunting task that it can be hard to know where, or how, to begin. Here's one answer: in southeastern Florida, with yellow foam earplugs.

The plugs are needed to keep out the din of the South Florida Water Management District's pumping station, with its 400-horsepower pumps submerged in the Miami River. They are capable of changing the direction of the river, ensuring that it always runs toward the ocean, as it's supposed to, draining storm water. Gravity used to do the job, but with sea level rising -- it's up at least 8 inches (20 centimeters) from what it was a century ago -- gravity doesn't always do the trick.

Florida's state and national politicians, including Governor Rick Scott and U.S. Senator Marco Rubio, are free to question whether climate change exists. Local officials don't have that luxury. When it floods, people call city hall.

The need for a practical response, requiring both pumping stations and political cooperation, makes South Florida ground zero (sea zero?) in the debate over climate change. Its public officials, elected and otherwise, are showing how adaptation is not only necessary but also possible.

Miami Beach, for example, is installing 80 underground pumps to deal with the increasingly frequent "sunny-day floods" that inundate the western side of the island city during high tides in the fall and spring. Miami-Dade County is reseeded mangroves behind the beaches and preserving coastal wetlands to soak up intensifying storm surges. Engineers in Fort Lauderdale and Pompano Beach are experimenting with new designs for "backflow preventers" to keep seawater from rushing into public pipes but still allow freshwater to flow out.

Southeastern Florida is facing the symptoms of climate change sooner than most places. Other effects identified in this month's National Climate Assessment -- persistent drought in Kansas, say, or frequent wildfires in Alaska -- could be decades off.

Rising seas are a problem for other places, including New York Harbor; Norfolk, Virginia; and Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay. But Florida's flat landscape, barely above sea level, makes it instantly vulnerable. Even in the best of times, before climate change, modern life here has depended on one of the world's most extensive public plumbing systems. The lower third of the Florida peninsula is laced with canals and levees designed to manage its abundant water (South Florida gets some 60 inches of rain a year) for agricultural irrigation, human consumption and drainage.

Except during powerful storms, the system has worked reasonably well. But sea-level rise is throwing a wrench in. Sunny-day floods and backward-flowing drainage canals aren't the only challenges. Saltwater has also been getting into the drinking water. The city of Hallandale Beach, north of Miami Beach, has had to abandon six of its eight wells. When South Florida's shallow freshwater aquifer is diminished -- as during the drier winter months -- seawater easily flows in through the porous limestone below. City and county officials have learned the importance of keeping the aquifer always full to maintain a healthy supply of freshwater.

As they have become amateur hydrologists, local officials have also banded together. Six years ago, the leaders of Broward, Miami-Dade, Monroe and Palm Beach counties formed the Southeast Florida Regional Climate Change Compact to share strategies, make joint plans and speak with a more unified voice to the state legislature. All four counties, which are as different politically as Miami Beach and Palm Beach are culturally, have approved the group's plan.

Among the plan's 110 resolutions are efforts to improve local flood maps and identify "adaptation action areas" -- spots most vulnerable to sea-level rise -- so as to tailor building codes and other ordinances accordingly. Climate-change mitigation is also part of the picture. The counties pledge, for example, to use more clean energy, increase use of public transit and bicycles, and provide incentives for saving energy.

These efforts won't do much to reduce rising emissions of global greenhouse gases. But they can affect public perception of the problem and help show how to deal with it. The region's

efforts have already attracted official visitors from as far away as Durban, South Africa, and Legazpi, Philippines.

Because while climate change is global, the response to it is local. For its annual summit, scheduled for early October in Miami Beach, the compact has invited representatives of Caribbean island nations. Maybe a few members of the U.S. Congress could attend, too -- to see what productive cooperation on climate change looks like.

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