

Florida: Public Opinion on Climate Change

The issue of climate change is increasingly being discussed in the media and within political circles. Around the globe actions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are being taken at all levels of government. Florida is consistently identified as one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change due to its extensive urban development in low lying areas, the economic importance of tourism and agriculture, unique ecosystems and reliance on groundwater for human consumption. Only relatively recently have legislators proposed changes aimed at both reducing the production of greenhouse gases in Florida and promoting proactive measures to reduce vulnerability to what experts believe will be the inevitable impacts. The goal of this study is to measure the perceptions of Florida residents about the causes and consequences of climate change, and about potential solutions. The main findings are presented here and are intended to aid policymakers, educators, the private sector and environmental organizations in their planning efforts in response to climate change.



Executive Summary

A representative sample of over 1,000 Floridians was surveyed in May 2008. A large majority of the respondents is convinced that global warming is happening (71%). Of those, 55% believe that global warming is caused mainly by human activities, while 32% believe it is caused mostly by natural changes in the environment, and 13% believe it is caused equally by humans and natural changes.

Only 43% of Floridians say they personally worry either a great deal (10%) or a fair amount (33%) about global warming, while 57% say they worry only a little (35%) or not at all (22%). Likewise, most Floridians believe that global warming is a greater threat to non-human species, people, and places relatively far away, than to themselves or other people in the state.

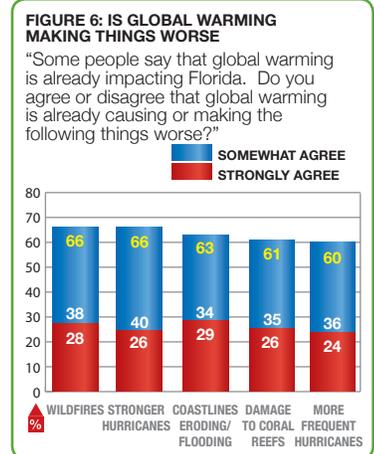
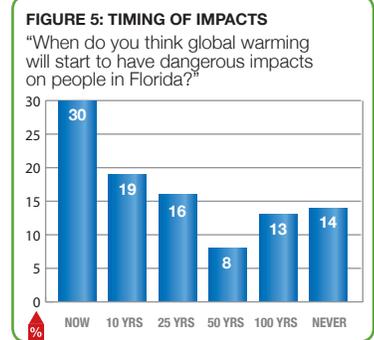
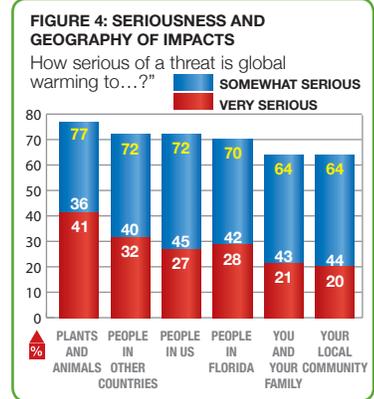
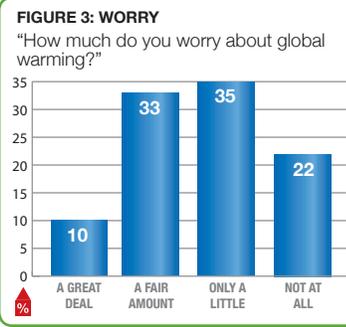
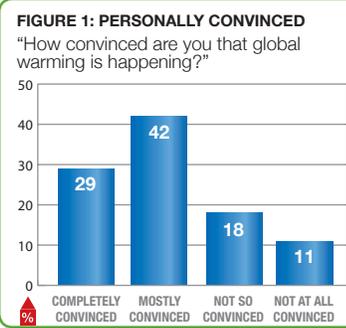
That is not to say, however, that Floridians believe the state will escape unscathed. In fact, 30% believe global warming is already having dangerous impacts on people in Florida now, while another 35% believe these dangerous impacts will occur within either the next 10 years (19%), or the next 25 years (16%). More specifically, a large majority of the public in Florida believes that during the next 50 years, global warming will cause worse storms, hurricanes, and tornadoes (80%), droughts and water shortages (80%), fewer fish (69%), infiltration of groundwater supplies by salt water (68%), flooding of major cities (68%), food shortages (68%), less tourism (64%), and increased rates of disease (57%). Likewise, a majority (69%) believes it is somewhat (36%) or very likely (33%) that parts of the Florida coast will need to be abandoned due to rising sea levels over the next 50 years. Finally, majorities believe that global warming is already causing or making the following things worse: wildfires (66%), stronger hurricanes (66%), coastline erosion and flooding (63%), damage to coral reefs (61%), and more frequent hurricanes (60%).

In line with these concerns about the impacts of global warming on the state, Floridians support more action by their elected officials. Large majorities of respondents say that their state legislators (66%), Governor Charlie Crist (62%), and their mayor (56%) should be doing more to address global warming.

Support for Climate Change Policies

A majority of Floridians supports four potential state-level policies, including:

- “Requiring electric utilities to produce at least 20% of their electricity from wind, solar, or other renewable energy sources, even if it cost the average household an extra \$100 a year” (65%).



Over half of Floridians believe that parts of the Florida coast may need to be abandoned due to rising sea levels over the next 50 years.



- “A subsidy to encourage building owners to replace old water heaters, air conditioners, light bulbs, and insulation. This subsidy would cost the average household \$5 a month in higher taxes. Those buildings that took advantage of the program would save money on their utility bills” (65%).

- “Installation of solar panels on state-owned buildings, even if the electricity generated is significantly more expensive than what state government normally pays for its electricity” (63%).

- “A \$2.50 surcharge on the average household’s monthly electric bill for a special fund to help make buildings more energy efficient and teach Floridians how to reduce their energy use” (51%).

Regarding potential federal policies, an even larger majority of Floridians supports: 1) an international treaty that requires the United States to cut its emissions of carbon dioxide by 90% by the year 2050 (78%), and 2) transferring subsidies from the fossil fuel industry to the renewable energy industry, even if this makes fossil fuels more expensive and renewable energy less expensive (76%). However, for the leading policy proposal in the U.S. Congress, only 43% of Floridians currently support a national system to cap and trade greenhouse gases.

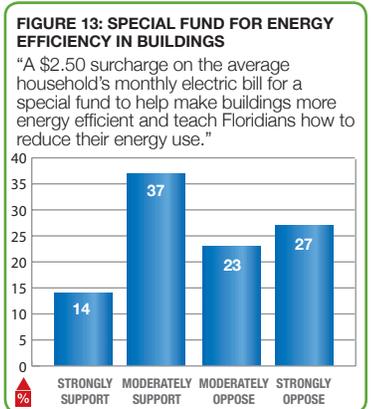
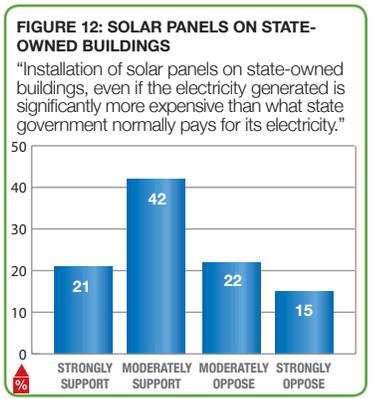
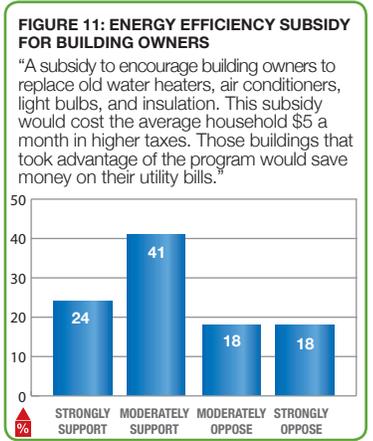
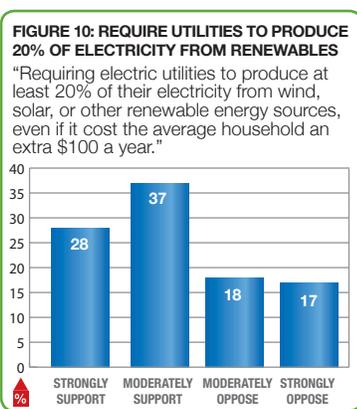
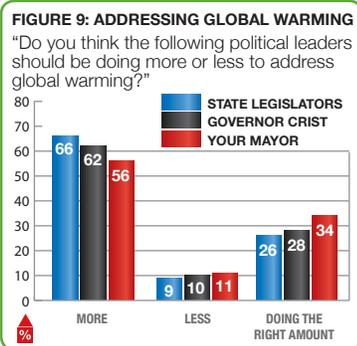
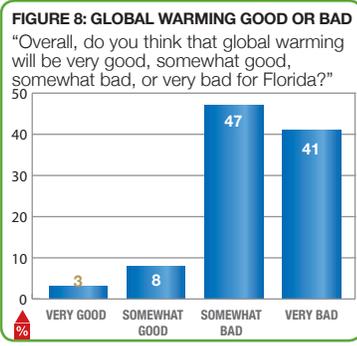
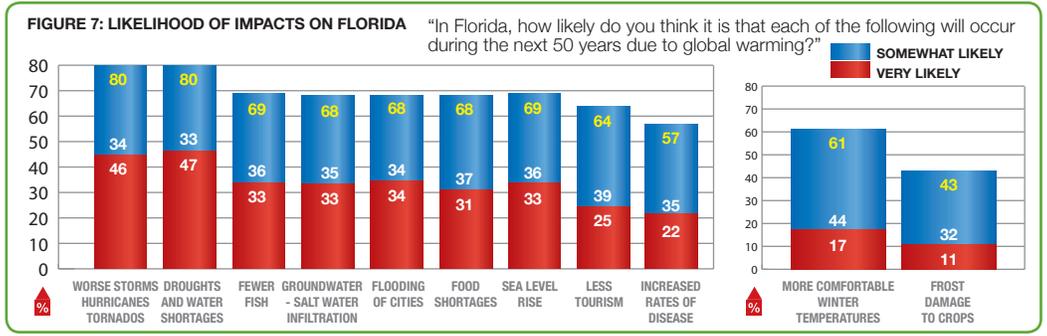
Trust

When asked, “How much do you trust the following groups to tell you the truth about global warming,” large majorities of the public trust their own family and friends (83%), followed by scientists (82%), and environmental organizations (72%). By contrast, fewer trust religious organizations (49%), the news media (44%), or corporations (19%). Among politicians, only Governor Charlie Crist is trusted to tell the truth about global warming by a majority of Floridians (54%), compared to Senator Barack Obama (49%), Senator John McCain (44%), and President George W. Bush (32%).

Individual Behavior

Finally, some Floridians say they are willing to make individual lifestyle changes to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions. A large majority say they are likely to buy more energy efficient appliances like refrigerators, stoves, washing machines, and dishwashers (83%). Meanwhile, 41% say they are likely to communicate their views on global warming to politicians, while 39% say they are likely to join, donate money or volunteer with an organization working on issues related to global warming.

With regard to the 2008 Presidential election, 3% of Floridians said global warming would be the single most important issue in their vote for president and 60% said it would be one of several important issues, while 37% said it would not be an important factor in their vote.



Almost 60% of Floridians believe there will be an increase in rates of disease due to global warming.

Conclusion

Overall, a large majority of the public in Florida believes that global warming is happening and caused by human activities. Likewise, large majorities believe global warming is already or will soon have a variety of significant impacts on the state. Yet only slightly less than half of the public are personally worried about climate change, likely because many believe it will primarily impact non-human species or people far away, not themselves or their own families. Large majorities, however, do think Governor Crist, their state legislators, and local mayors should be doing more to address global warming and are broadly supportive of state and federal initiatives to reduce local energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, many say they are willing to take individual action to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions.

Methodology

In May 2008, 1,077 adults in Florida aged 18 and above were interviewed as part of a state-wide survey conducted by Anthony Leiserowitz (Yale University) and Kenneth Broad (University of Miami), with support from the U.S. National Science Foundation, Decision Research, Inc. and the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions, based at Columbia University. The survey was fielded May 1 through May 19 by Knowledge Networks, using a representative, online research panel of Florida respondents. The within-panel completion rate was 66% (see <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/index.html> for more information about the KN methodology). The sample was weighted to correspond with U.S. Census Bureau parameters for the state of Florida. The margin of error for the complete set of weighted data is $\pm 2.9\%$.



POLICY PREFERENCES AT FEDERAL LEVEL

Some people say that the federal government should act to reduce global warming, while others say the federal government should have different priorities.



“How much do you support or oppose each of the following policies?”

FIGURE 14: INTERNATIONAL TREATY

“Agreeing to an international treaty that requires the United States to cut its emissions of carbon dioxide 90% by the year 2050.”

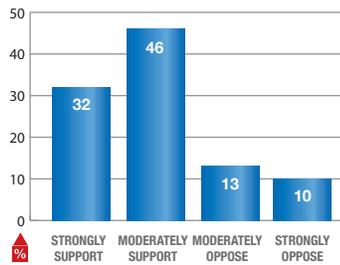


FIGURE 15: TRANSFER SUBSIDIES TO RENEWABLE ENERGY INDUSTRY

“The federal government provides approximately \$5 billion a year in subsidies to the fossil fuel industry (coal, oil, natural gas). Some people have proposed transferring these subsidies to the renewable energy industry (wind, solar, biomass, etc.) to develop cleaner forms of energy. This would make fossil fuels more expensive and renewable energy less expensive. How much do you support or oppose this proposal?”

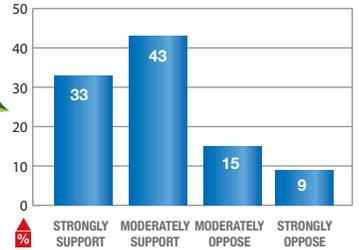
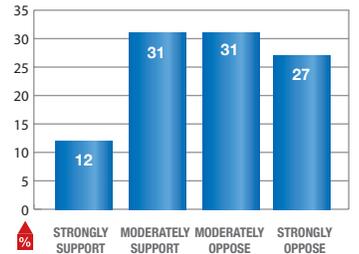


FIGURE 16: CAP AND TRADE MARKET

“A national market that allows companies to buy and sell the right to emit the greenhouse gases that are said to cause global warming. The federal government would set a national cap on emissions. Each company would then purchase the right to emit a portion of this total amount. If a company then emitted more than its portion, it would have to buy more emission rights from other companies or pay large fines. In principle, how much do you support or oppose a national market that allows companies to buy and sell the right to emit greenhouse gases?”



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