LEGISLATIVE SESSION 2017

The Florida legislative session began on Tuesday, March 7, 2017, with the usual fanfare — but with an unusual level of uncertainty as well. Dynamics among the House, Senate and Governor’s Office, and under Republican control — have some longtime session-watchers wondering if this year’s renditions of the annual rumors and predictions of a special session might be accurate.

While the Association is tracking a wide variety of issues that impact the forest industry, below are summaries of our legislative priorities as designated by the Governmental Relations Committee and approved by the Executive Committee:

ISSUE 1 – Healthy Forests Program

Maintaining healthy and sustainable working forests is vital to Florida’s environment and natural resources. While forests provide jobs for thousands of Floridians, the often unrecognized benefit of healthy forests is their environmental contributions to both water quality and quantity, as well as to the flora and fauna which make their homes in the forests.

As Florida’s urban and coastal areas continue to expand, the pressure on inland forests continues to increase. We already see the impacts with a rise in forest land conversion and a drop in the reforestation rates over the last 30 years. In 2008, reforestation rates hit a historic low with only 48,000 acres of forestland planted. In 2015, 126,000 acres were planted, which, while a significant upsurge, still remains far shy of the almost 300,000 planted in 1986.

The Healthy Forests Program would allow the Florida Forest Service (FFS) to provide Best Management Practice (BMP) cost share to timberland owners. This program, which is similar in nature to BMP cost share for other agricultural commodities, would authorize FFS to provide a 50% cost share match for BMP activities which mitigate erosion, improve aquifer recharge, remove invasive species, etc.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports legislation creating the Florida Healthy Forests Program.

Support Commissioner Putnam’s $3 million budget request for this program.

ISSUE 2 – Natural Resource Protection

For water users and the environment. There are a number of legislative proposals being discussed to address Florida’s water quality and quantity issues. While the Association is generally supportive of these efforts, it notes that these and related problems arose over many years and cannot be resolved overnight.

Further, a number of programs are already in place working to address our state’s water and natural resources, such as TMDLs and Basin Management Action Plans; the establishment of minimum flows and levels; Best Management Practices (BMPs) for water quality; the state’s recently adopted Imperiled Species Rule and its associated Species Action Plans; and Integrated Conservation Strategies that include Wildlife BMPs.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports efforts to restore and improve Florida’s natural resources and believes the solution can be found through implementation and funding of existing and new programs, including reforestation/BMP cost-share programs and compensation for ecosystem services.

Support FDACS’ request for $50 million for Rural and Family Lands & FDEP’s request for $50 million for Springs Protection.

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ISSUE 3 – Sales Tax Exemptions

The 2015 legislature expanded the sales tax exemptions for ag and forestry to include parts and repairs of power farm equipment used in agricultural production and a partial exemption of specific trailers owned by the farmer. Sales tax on trailers used in the production of forestry and agriculture, but not owned by the farmer, was not part of the 2015 exemption.

Florida Forestry Association Position:
The Association supports legislation that repeals the state sales tax on trailers used in logging and other forest service industries.

ISSUE 4 – Immigration Reform

Over the past few years, there have been legislative proposals requiring employers to use the federal E-Verify system to verify the legal status of its workers.

Florida Forestry Association Position:
The Association believes immigration reform is a national issue and should be dealt with at the federal level, rather than on a state-by-state basis.

ISSUE 5 – Workers’ Compensation Reform

In 2003 Florida adopted sweeping reforms to the state’s workers’ comp system which resulted in immediate and substantial reductions in worker’s compensation premiums. These changes were designed to provide predictability for employers without sacrificing benefits to injured workers. In 2016 the Florida Supreme Court ruled on two separate cases on the application of Florida’s law and ultimately found provisions of the law unconstitutional. As a result, in December 2016 Florida employers were hit with a 14.5% premium increase and many believe another increase of equal or greater amounts could happen within one year.

Florida Forestry Association Position:
The Association supports changes to Florida’s workers’ compensation law which strikes a reasonable balance between rate predictability for employers and benefits for injured employees.

ISSUE 6 – Amendment 1 Funding

In 2014 Florida voters approved an amendment to Florida’s Constitution entitled Florida’s Land and Water Legacy. This initiative requires 33% of documentary stamp revenues collected by the state to be specifically used for the conservation, preservation and protection of Florida’s land and water resources. Forestry operations are low intensity land uses which encourage aquifer recharge and provide a natural buffer and filtration system for stormwater runoff. Healthy working forests also provide essential habitat for many wildlife species.

Florida Forestry Association Position:
The Association supports the use of Amendment 1 funding to achieve land acquisition goals, while placing a priority on less than fee acquisitions that support healthy and vibrant working forests and allow the land to remain in production.

ISSUE 7 – Payment for Ecosystem Services

As Florida’s population continues to grow and strain our water resources, working forests can be part of the solution. Florida’s forests provide a variety of essential ecosystem services like water filtration and aquifer recharge, carbon storage, wildlife habitat, and greenspace for recreational opportunities. Landowner incentive programs to keep working forests working should be considered.

Florida Forestry Association Position:
The Association supports a statewide financial incentive program that rewards a landowner for providing these essential ecosystem services.

ISSUE 8 – Budget Issues

Florida Forest Service
Rural and Family Lands Program $ 50.0 M
Firefighting Equipment Replacement $ 5.87 M
Healthy Forests Program $ 3.0 M
Land Management/ Maintenance $ 2.9 M
Facility Replacement/ Repair $ 2.9 M
Department of Environmental Protection
Springs Protection Funding $ 50.0 M

WORKING FORESTS CAUCUS

US Representatives Westernman (R-AR), Peterson (D-MN), Herrera Beutler (R-WA) and Bishop (D-GA), along with House Republican Conference Chair McMorris-Rodgers (R-WA) and our partners at the American Forest Foundation and the National Alliance of Forest Owners, have launched the House Working Forests Caucus. The Caucus provides a mechanism for members of Congress who support working forests to learn about the issues and collaborate on supportive policy.

It is imperative that members of the Association urge their federal representatives to join! Representatives have received letters from the Association; they need to hear from their own constituents as well.

For help with a letter or contact information for your congressperson, please contact Lee Ann Fisch (LeeAnn@ForestFla.org or 850.222.5646). Many thanks to Congressmen Vern Buchanan, Neal Dunn and Ted Yoho for their participation in this important group.

WORKING FOREST PARTNERS

The Working Forest Partners (WFP) held their annual meeting on January 19, 2017, at the Wakulla Environmental Institute. Presentations laid out the issues facing those involved in the partnership: working forests’ role in water quality and quantity; the advantages of conservation easements on working lands; wildlife management BMPs; and management of public lands.

Specific issues and actions were delved into as Association Executive Vice President Alan Shelby shared possible priorities for the group: Rural and Family Lands, Florida Forever and others. The discussion was healthy and engaged, leading to better understanding among the various groups represented.

Ultimately it was generally agreed that, for the short term, the advisable path would be to narrow the focus to two issues with which the group could gain traction and see success: general support for the Rural and Family Lands Program and the Florida Forever Program. Longer term goals include increased recognition of forestry’s contribution to water quality and quantity, advancing research, and monetizing resource services.

“Even greater than the individual issues discussed is the discussion itself,” said Association President Michael Dooner. “I believe that WFP can and will play a tremendous role in keeping working forests working in Florida through continued communication on focused areas of mutual concern and agreement.”

TIMBER HARVESTING EQUIPMENT PROGRAM LAUNCHES AT CCF

The College of Central Florida is offering a new noncredit program to prepare students for employment in the vital and expanding logging and timber industry in North Central Florida.

The Timber Harvesting Equipment program will begin Monday, May 8, and run through June 30. Students will participate in five weeks of classroom instruction from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday, followed by three weeks of all-day field instruction with hands-on experience.

Successful applicants will receive full-tuition scholarships.

To learn more, contact: Holly McGlashan
Manager, Levy Center
352-493-9533
mcglashan@cf.edu

SAVE THE DATES!
August 29-31, 2017
Florida Forestry Association Annual Meeting
Sandestin Golf and Beach Resort
Sandestin, FL

www.FloridaForest.org
Printed: 4/7/17
#FORESTPROUD MEMBERSHIP MEETINGS

The Association held a series of three membership meetings in March. The first was held March 16, 2017, in Blountstown, FL, sponsored by Farm Credit and hosted by Bennett T. Eubanks, III.

The second was held March 23, 2017, at Association headquarters in Tallahassee, FL, showcasing our recent renovations.

The final meeting was held March 30, 2017, at Hollinswood Ranch in Crystal River, FL, sponsored and hosted by longtime Association member Dixie Hollins.

As the pictures show, great fellowship and good times abounded!

MAITLAND PROPOSES BAN ON WOOD CONSTRUCTION

The Maitland City Council received press recently for their intention to pursue a ban on wood-frame construction. State law prohibits local governments from doing so. As such, the Council intends to approach the League of Cities for help with legislation that would provide the needed authority.

The Association has reached out to City Council members and will continue to monitor proposed legislation as bills go through the process; however, no action is expected during this session.

Association Executive Vice President Alan Shelby noted, “There is a lot of comfort in knowing any kind of ban on wood-frame construction cannot be put into place without state legislative approval, and we are going to be diligent about not letting that happen. The good news is this situation is a great educational opportunity to help a new audience understand the many ways that working forests work for construction.”

FORESTRY FIGHTS BACK IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

Mike Branch, Director of Operations and Regulatory Affairs, reports that a group of local and out of county environmental activists tried to convince the Columbia County Board of County Commissioners at their February meeting to impose a substantial fee for increasing livestock numbers beyond their made up stated limits in the Ichetucknee Spring Shed and Santa Fe River basin. This proposal was unanimously defeated by the Board.

Branch credited the defeat to Florida’s Agricultural Lands and Practices Act and also to the strong participation by area farmers and citizens who vocalized opposition to the proposal.

“The defeat was an important one for forestry,” Association Executive Vice President Alan Shelby said. “Even though we were not directly affected by the proposal, it would have set a terrible precedent. Forest landowners do not need local governments telling them how many trees to plant or harvest.”

SAVE ON HUNTING LEASE LIABILITY INSURANCE

If you’re ready to talk turkey about saving money on hunting lease liability insurance, contact our partners at Outdoor Underwriters, Inc., about reduced rates for Association members. Timberland liability and fire damage insurance for standing timber are also available.

Visit the Association’s website at www.FloridaForest.org for details. Information about insurance can be found under the Programs tab.

MASTER LOGGER TRAINING

The Florida Master Logger 2-Day Logger Training will be held at the Lake City Gateway College in the Wilson Rivers Media Room on June 7 - 8, 2017. Completion of this course is required for becoming a Florida SFI Certified Logger.

The next 2017 FSFI-SIC Continuing Logger Education Logger Training Workshop for trained loggers will be at the Walton County Extension Office building in Defuniak Springs, FL, on Thursday, July 13, 2017. The complete schedule for remaining classes in 2017 is below:

- July 13 - Defuniak Springs, FL
- October 26 - Gainesville, FL
- December 5 - Lake City, FL
- December 7 - Blountstown, FL

To register for one of these logger training workshops, please contact Whitney Hough (Whitney@ForestFla.org or 850.222.5646).

PLANNED GIVING, BEQUESTS AND CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS

Consider making a gift of a lifetime to support the future of Florida’s working forests by naming the Florida Forestry Association or Florida Forestry Foundation as a beneficiary in your will, charitable trust, life insurance policy, estate plan or retirement plan. Please contact Alan Shelby at 850.222.5646 for more information.
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