2021 STATE LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Due to Covid-19 concerns, this legislative session has been very different than previous years. The House of Representatives has developed strict regulations limiting visitors, while the Senate has prohibited them altogether. Public testimony at committee meetings is given via video from the Donald Tucker Civic Center. Receptions and other traditional legislative events were canceled.

According to Association lobbyist Jim Spratt of Magnolia Strategies, all of these unprecedented factors have highlighted the importance of developing relationships with elected officials.

"With such restricted access, relationships with elected officials matter this year more than ever before," Spratt said. "We are fortunate to have worked diligently to build these relationships so that our elected officials recognize the Association as a trusted source of information. We are depending upon and utilizing these relationships to help advance good policy, as well as to stop well-intended yet misguided policy which could impact our members."

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

ISSUE 1 – Florida’s Right to Farm Act

As Florida’s population continues to increase, the pressure on agricultural and silvicultural operations grows exponentially. In too many areas of Florida, new houses and developments bring in residents who do not appreciate the sights, sounds, and smells of agricultural and silvicultural operations. To this end, Florida’s Right to Farm law was purposely designed to protect agricultural and silvicultural operations from nuisance lawsuits and other general aggravation. Recently, we have begun to see a push to attack agriculture and silviculture for normal and customary burning activities. In addition, groups which are not based in Florida have threatened lawsuits and other actions to stop or fundamentally change normal and customary agricultural and silvicultural activities.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports strengthening Florida’s Right to Farm law to protect agricultural and silvicultural landowners from frivolous lawsuits and to further recognize and protect normal and customary land management activities.

ISSUE 2 – COVID Liability Protection/Lawsuit Abuse

Perennially, tort reform is the most difficult of issues to quantify for your business’s bottom line. Often this is because the reforms don’t go far enough or, simply, an attorney finds a way around the reform to proceed with legal action. During a large part of 2020, the Association, along with many business groups, has been discussing several specific lawsuit abuses and liability improvements to help Florida businesses. Simultaneously, as the novel coronavirus has impacted many, the need to provide protection to employers who are doing everything reasonable to protect their employees has risen to the top of the heap.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports legislation protecting employers from frivolous lawsuits and creating clear, reasonable parameters for businesses to follow as an affirmative defense from COVID-19 lawsuits. In addition, the Association supports efforts to protect employers from costly, frivolous lawsuits which do little to protect employees, hurt the employers, and significantly increase the cost of doing business in Florida.

ISSUE 3 – Wildlife Best Management Practices

Recently, some groups have been pushing to make the voluntary Wildlife BMPs mandatory to obtain an exemption from filing for an incidental take permit during management activities. This action flies in the face of and disregards the many successes of the existing program, as well as the willing partnerships landowners have chosen to forge to protect species. The Wildlife BMP program continues to be a success and should be utilized by other states as a successful example for species protection as opposed to being morphed into a government program which discourages willing participation.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports the continued use of the Wildlife BMP manual as a voluntary, incentive-based program which allows landowners to appropriately protect species on their land and continues to recognize the success of willing participants for the betterment of the habitat and the species.

ISSUE 4 – Private Property Rights

Private property rights are a basic tenet of our constitutional republic. Notwithstanding this fact, it wasn’t until the passage of the Bert J. Harris Private Property Rights Act by the Florida legislature that landowners in Florida had an affirmative defense for a government taking of their property. To put it simply, the Harris Act fundamentally strengthened a landowner’s position against the government in dealing with governmental actions which inordinately burden the landowner. As with any law, good or bad, as time goes by it often becomes necessary to update and tweak the law based on experience or court rulings.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports legislation which strengthens the Harris Act and private property rights in general.

ISSUE 5 – Ecosystem Services

Agricultural and silvicultural lands are, in many ways, the last line of defense in a rapidly urbanizing state. In addition to providing the food, fiber, and foliage to a global economy, these lands are actively managed to provide habitat, control invasive species, and provide water recharge areas. Without question, agricultural and silvicultural lands are the only spaces left in Florida for future growth, agricultural and silviculture production, and conservation. To this end, it is imperative to rethink the values and benefits provided by these working agricultural and silvicultural lands.

Fortunately, there is much space in this area for a myriad of solutions. For example, the private sector is actively buying and selling carbon credits through long-term contracts with landowners. Nevertheless, there are still opportunities for the government to encourage or incentivize greater recognition and monetization of the many benefits these lands provide.

Florida Forestry Association Position: The Association supports renewed focus and efforts to determine the value of ecosystem services provided by agricultural and silvicultural landowners. We further support the utilization of both private and public options to monetize these critical benefits.

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ISSUE 6 – Sales Tax Exemptions

As the state of Florida continues to wrestle with the impacts of the novel coronavirus, some elected officials have suggested the potential of repealing existing sales tax exemptions to help balance the state’s budget. However, Florida’s tax law differs from most states in that items in Florida are all taxable unless the legislature specifically provides an exemption. To this end, Florida business owners rely on these exemptions to remain competitive in the national and global market.

**Florida Forestry Association Position:** The Association supports maintaining existing sales tax exemptions utilized in the wood and wood products industry.

ISSUE 7 – Trucking Weights

Fuel prices, foreign competition, and increased traffic on highway infrastructure have fueled an outcry for increased trucking weights across the nation. The Association has been and continues to be a vocal supporter of a permanent increase in truck weights on federal highways. In 2010, the state legislature approved an increase in truck weights up to 88,000 pounds on non-interstate highways.

**Florida Forestry Association Position:** The Association supports federal legislation to permanently increase truck weights on federal interstate highways.

ISSUE 8 – 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 9 – Priority Budget Issues:

**Florida Forest Service –**

- Firefighting Helicopter $ 4.9 M
- Firefighting Equipment Replacement $ 6.5 M
- Rural and Family Lands Program $ 15.0 M

**UF/IFAS –**

- Forestry Education $ 1.1 M
- Workload $ 3.7 M

**Department of Environmental Protection –**

- Springs Protection Funding $ 50 M
- Florida Forever Funding $ 50 M

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**AN INTRODUCTION FROM CONGRESSWOMAN KAT CAMMACK**

This Congress, I’m proud to serve as the U.S. Representative from Florida’s Third Congressional District, working hard for the farmers and ranchers in my district and across the state. I grew up on a small cattle ranch in Colorado and understand the importance of agriculture to our state’s economy, which passed tourism in 2020 as the state’s number one economic driver.

As the only Florida Republican on the House Agriculture Committee, I’ll be a strong advocate for Florida’s timber farmers, striving to support the hardworking men and women who make this industry so special. Never hesitate to reach out to me or my team when we can be of assistance to you and your colleagues on our website: cammack.house.gov

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**ASSOCIATION LEADERSHIP SHARES FORESTRY STORY IN LAKE CITY**

**Association President Carlton Jones** and **Executive Vice President Alan Shelby** shared the forestry story in Lake City on February 25, 2021, with a presentation to the local Rotary Club.

For Jones, who has been a Rotary member for 28 years and has also served as president of that organization, it was a natural match.

“I’m proud to be part of both groups,” Jones said. “I believe we need to be innovative and stay positive, especially in these challenging times...”

“For Jones, who has been a Rotary member for 28 years and has also served as president of that organization, it was a natural match.

“The Florida Forestry Association and Lake City Rotary Club live out that philosophy every day,” he said. “They’re both committed to making things better.”

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**SCHOOL OF FOREST, FISHERIES, & GEOMATICS SCIENCES**

The University of Florida’s School of Forest Resources and Conservation is now the School of Forest, Fisheries, and Geomatics Sciences (FFGS).

Terrell “Red” Baker, FFFS director, spoke at the announcement ceremony about how the new name represents the three broad program areas under the school: forest resources and conservation, fisheries and aquatic sciences, and geomatics.

“We are thrilled to have our geomatics and fisheries colleagues more appropriately recognized in our name,” Baker said. “We are here today to celebrate not just our program’s individual accomplishments, but what we have done and will continue to do together as a school.”

The name was chosen after close engagement with faculty, staff, students, alumni and stakeholders, including in-person brainstorming sessions, phone calls and surveys. The new name will increase visibility for the school, including hundreds of students and faculty in the fisheries and aquatic sciences graduate major, geomatics graduate and undergraduate majors, and marine sciences undergraduate major.

“One thing we’ve learned over the last decade or more is that we are simply much stronger than the sum of our parts,” Baker said. “As science scholarship and education becomes increasingly interdisciplinary our school is uniquely situated to help provide solutions for our lives.”

Scott Angle, UF vice president for agriculture and natural resources and the leader of UF/IFAS, also spoke at the event, highlighting how the renaming represents a positive step forward for UF/IFAS as the university strives for a top-5 public university ranking.

Learn more about FFGS at its new website: ffgs.ifas.ufl.edu

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**ARE YOU READY FOR WILDFIRE?**

Protect your life, home and community, visit: BeWildfireReadyFL.com
The College of Central Florida’s Timber Harvesting Equipment program prepares students for employment in the vital and expanding logging and timber industry in North Central Florida. Students participate in five weeks of classroom instruction 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday through Thursday, followed by three weeks of all-day field instruction with hands-on experience.

Students learn:

- Introduction to the Forest Industry
- Basic Forest Management
- Timber Harvesting Operations
- Silvicultural and Wildlife Best Management Practices
- Timber Harvesting Safety
- Basic Operation of a Feller Buncher, Skidder, and Loader

Upon successful completion, students will achieve three certifications: Master Logger Certification, OSHA 10-hour Certification, and CPR Certification. They will also have the opportunity to interview with area logging contractors for immediate employment in the timber harvesting industry.

The 2021 program will be held June 7-July 29 at the CCF Levy Campus. To learn more and apply, contact Leah Gamble, Levy Campus, Manager of Instructional Services, at 352-658-4077 ext. 2118 or gambel@cf.edu.