



March 23, 2007

Week 3 Overview

The third week of the legislative session was a good one for agricultural issues. Bills on agritourism and a sales tax exemption for materials used for non-residential farm buildings and fences passed the House Agribusiness Committee unanimously.

At this point, our industry remains in a solid position legislatively. Uncertainty about the state's financial situation lingers, however.

Cindy Littlejohn, lobbyist for the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (IFAS), reports that the House Education budget includes monies for IFAS Workload Increase Formula as well as \$1 million for citrus research. Items such as Water Resource Sustainability, Alternative Cropping Systems, and Invasive Species Research were not funded.

The Senate Education budget has not been released at this time

Polical Highlights

Rumors are growing that Sen. Nancy Argenziano, R-Crystal River, will be leaving her Senate seat for an appointment to the Public Service Commission. Reps. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness, and Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, are two potential contenders for the vacated seat, as is Richard Corcoran, former chief of staff for House Speaker Marco Rubio.

We are sad to report that this week Rep. Stan Mayfield, R-Vero Beach, announced that he has been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Rep. Mayfield plans to continue serving his district as he fights this disease; please keep him and his family in your thoughts and prayers.

Farm Bureau Day

The voice of agriculture was heard in Florida's capital city this week as hundreds of Farm Bureau members arrived in Tallahassee for Farm Bureau Day activities.

On Monday night, almost 200 Farm Bureau members gathered for a legislative briefing at the Cross Creek Golf Club in Tallahassee. Majority Leader Marty Bowen and Reps. Ralph Poppell and Bryan Nelson were special guests for the occasion. Farm Bureau members were the first to hear Rep. Bowen's formal announcement that she has decided to run for Commissioner of Agriculture in 2010.

Armed with information, Farm Bureau members ascended on Capitol Hill Tuesday to discuss agricultural issues with their legislators. Representatives and senators were asked for their support of sales tax exemptions, agritourism, private property rights, alternative energy using Florida-based feedstock, and a reduction of landowners' liability for trespassers. They were also asked to protect the Greenbelt statute.

The annual Farm Bureau Day legislative reception was held Tuesday evening. Hundreds of our members were able to mingle with 35 state legislators as well as Commissioner of Agriculture Charlie Bronson, Lieutenant Governor Jeff Kottkamp, Chief Financial Officer Alex Sink, and Secretary of State Kurt Browning.

Farm Bureau extends a huge thank you to our generous sponsors and to everyone who set up exhibits and helped decorate. Our success is very much dependent on the participation of our members on a county level. We appreciate your continued support!

Myakka River (SB 2346, HB 1281)

Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, and Rep. Keith Fitzgerald, D-Sarasota, have introduced legislation to extend the Myakka River's partial Wild and Scenic River designation to the entire river.

The Myakka River begins in Manatee County and flows through Sarasota County, emptying into Charlotte Harbor. Currently only the 34-mile segment through Sarasota County is considered Wild and Scenic.

In 1985, the Myakka River Management Coordinating Council was formed to develop and maintain a management plan for the segment of the River designated as Wild and Scenic.

The 29-member Council is made up of state, county and local agencies and governments as well as independent interests.

When presented with the legislation to extend the designation to the entire course of the river, Farm Bureau expressed concern about the 220-foot buffer zone along each side of the river – termed the “river area” in the management plan – and the fact that local governments could make regulations more stringent than the Council's.

In addition, the proposed management plan would include provisions for “agricultural and forestry practices in nature to those in the river area on January 1, 1986.”

This raised serious questions for agricultural producers in the area. What if an affected producer had changed his land use from citrus because his trees were wiped out by citrus canker? Or what if a producer planted cabbage instead of tomatoes or started growing tomatoes instead of raising cattle? Producers have to be able to respond to market changes as well as devastating diseases, pests, or hurricanes.

After much discussion, Sen. Bennett decided to amend his original bill. On Thursday, the Senate Environmental Preservation Committee passed the amended bill, which has the Council study the issue and receive input from those who live in Manatee and Charlotte Counties. The Council's recommendations will then be sent to Sen. Bennett and Rep. Fitzgerald for possible legislation if needed.

Property Tax

Proposals to reduce property taxes continue to evolve as legislators receive input from citizens and local governments around the state.

On Wednesday, House Republicans released a revised version of their original proposal to replace homestead property taxes with an increased sales tax. The new plan would ask voters statewide to pass a constitutional amendment to trade lower property taxes for higher sales taxes.

The package involves several components: First, the state would increase the statewide sales tax by one penny to seven cents and eliminate a state-imposed school property tax on homestead residences, a tax that is estimated to make up almost one-third of the average homeowner's property tax bill.

Second, local governments would have to roll back their property tax collections to 2003-04 levels, which would provide tax savings for business property owners. Future property tax collections would be capped unless local governments voted unanimously to override the cap.

Finally, by November 2010 every county and school district would have to hold countywide referenda to give voters the option of eliminating all county property taxes on homestead residences by raising the sales tax another penny and eliminating all remaining school district taxes on the same property for another half-penny. House lawmakers estimate that the revised plan would save property owners \$5.5 billion.

Senate leadership has indicated there is little support in their chamber for trading property taxes for increased sales taxes.

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