



## GOVERNOR SIGNS OFF ON HURRICANE IDALIA AID

The Association worked with Agriculture Commissioner

Wilton Simpson and the Florida legislature during the special session in November to address the need for hurricane relief and recovery. The results were significant, and the legislation has now been signed by Governor Ron DeSantis.

Highlights of **HB 1C**, passed unanimously by both the House and the Senate, are below:

### Timber Landowner Assistance Cost-Share Grant Program

- \$37.5 million appropriated to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) for the Timber Landowner Assistance Cost-Share Grant Program.
- Assists timber landowners through cost share grants in declared counties damaged from Hurricane Idalia with site preparation (including debris removal) and tree planting on impacted forest lands.
- Grants must be up to 75% of the costs for site preparation and tree planting costs with a maximum award of \$250,000.

### Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program

- \$75 million is appropriated to FDACS for the Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program for Hurricane Idalia.
- Established to make low-interest or interest-free loans, up to \$500,000 for an application period, to agriculture and aquaculture producers that have experienced damage or destruction from declared natural disasters.
- Loans may be used to restore, repair, or replace essential physical property or remove vegetative debris from essential physical property.

Additionally, to mitigate the impacts of recent disasters affecting the state, HB 1-C does the following:

- Provides that certain agricultural equipment that was unable to be used for 60 days due to Hurricane

Idalia would be assessed at salvage value on the 2024 property tax roll.

- Grants refunds of sales tax paid on fencing materials used to repair or replace farm fences on lands classified as agriculture and were damaged due to Hurricane Idalia.
- Grants refunds of sales tax paid on building materials used to repair or replace nonresidential farm buildings damaged as a result of Hurricane Idalia.
- Grants refunds of motor fuel taxes used for agricultural shipments and debris removal after Hurricane Idalia.

Many thanks to Governor DeSantis, Commissioner Simpson, and bill sponsors Senator Corey Simon and Representative Jason Shoaf for bringing this important legislation to fruition.

## 2024 LEGISLATIVE SESSION



The 2024 legislative session will begin on Tuesday, January 9. Forestry Day at the Capitol will be held the following week in conjunction with the Association's board of directors' meeting on Wednesday, January 17.

While the Association is tracking a wide variety of issues that impact the forest community, below are summaries of state legislative priorities as designated by the Governmental Relations Committee (GRC):

### Sales Tax Exemption on Trailers

The 2022 legislature expanded sales tax exemptions on farm trailers used in the production and transport of forestry and agricultural crops. However, only trailers owned by a farmer as defined in Florida law qualify for the exemption. This excludes a significant segment of trailers used by loggers and other forestry service providers.

*The Association supports legislation to expand the state sales tax exemption on trailers to include those used in logging and other forest service industries.*

### Mass Timber

Mass timber is a relatively new product to the market and has demonstrated its comparability to other materials related to wind, fires, load, and cost. The 2021 International Building Code recognized mass timber as an appropriate material to be used in new construction projects. However, the Florida Building Commission has not yet included mass timber in its updates to the state building code.

*The Association supports legislation directing the Florida Building Commission to include mass timber as an approved material in the state building code.*

### Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS)

PFAS are a complex family of chemicals which are critical in many of the products we use to power our lives. Not surprisingly, PFAS are not all created equal; each chemical has its own unique structure and use. Recently, legacy PFAS have shown up in locations such as airports, military bases, and fire training centers, most likely due to PFAS being used in many common fire suppression foams. Both the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Protection have contemplated new regulations and water quality standards which would include criteria for PFAS. Given their unique nature, there is still much debate on the impacts of PFAS.

*The Association supports a measured and scientifically defensible approach to the creation and adoption of PFAS standards. Standards must also take technical and economic feasibility into consideration, as well as the attainability of any proposed metrics or numeric criteria for PFAS.*

### Tangible Personal Property Taxes

Under Florida law, businesses are required to pay taxes on all tangible personal property. The taxes are collected by local governments and are a vital part of local government revenues. Florida's constitution provides a nominal amount of relief through an exemption to a small portion of the tax, but agricultural and forest products businesses pay a significant bill statewide.

*The Association supports legislation to increase the current exemption or to eliminate tangible personal property taxes on forest and wood products companies.*

*continued on next page>*

## Heat Ordinances

Worker safety is of paramount importance to forest and wood products businesses. Employers utilize safety requirements, personal protective equipment, and training to help ensure the safety of their workers. In addition, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is currently developing updated Heat Illness and Heat Safety standards for all employers nationally. Nevertheless, some local governments in Florida are exploring developing their own unique Heat Illness regulations. The potential for inconsistencies between local rules, the updated OSHA rules, and existing worker safety guidance on the state level will certainly create confusion.

*The Association supports legislation curbing local governments from developing heat illness and safety ordinances. The Association believes any new requirements, educational programs, or policies should not get ahead of OSHA's updates that are currently in development.*

## Critical Wetlands

During the 2023 Florida legislative session, the legislature passed updates to Florida water law. These updates enabled water management districts to develop a database of wetlands and other hydrologic features for the purposes of conservation and to meet existing requirements under Florida's minimum flows and levels (MFLs) laws. While the intent is laudable, in practice some water management districts have set up systems where landowners who have critical wetland features are automatically included in the database and must take action to "opt out."

*The Association supports legislation or rules that allow impacted landowners to "opt into" inclusion in the database, rather than requiring them to "opt out."*

## Priority Budget Issues:

### Florida Forest Service –

Wildfire Equipment Replacement	\$12.6 M
Rural & Family Lands Program	\$300 M
Aviation & Operation Budgets	\$5.4 M
FL's Future Forest Reforestation Program	\$4 M
Replace Forestry Stations	\$14.1 M

### UF/IFAS –

Workload	\$5.6 M
Natural Resources Quantification	\$3 M
Center for Artificial Intelligence in Ag	\$19 M

### Department of Environmental Protection –

Springs Protection Funding	\$50 M
Florida Forever Funding	\$100 M

The GRC also designated several priority issues on the federal level:

## Waters of the United States (WOTUS)

The WOTUS rules establish criteria for determining whether a water body falls under federal jurisdiction under the Navigable Water Act. Specifically, WOTUS definitions of "specific nexus" to traditional navigable waters, the characterization of use for manmade ditches and streams, and the definitions of ephemeral and intermittent streams all have a direct and potentially adverse impact throughout Florida.

*The Association supports WOTUS rules which provide clarity and certainty for the wood products industry. We will continue to advocate for regional and state-specific flexibility on application of the WOTUS rules where appropriate. We will also advocate for definitions that do not expand federal jurisdictional authority to every water body in Florida.*

## Trucking Weights

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. The limit on federal interstate highways is currently 80,000 pounds.

*The Association supports federal legislation to permanently increase truck weights for transporters of forestry and ag products on federal interstate highways.*

## Immigration Reform

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

*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.*

## Air Quality Regulation/EPA's PM 2.5 Rule updates

Florida remains the national model for the success of prescribed burning as an effective land management and wildfire mitigation tool. Although Florida's program receives much national recognition, there are groups who aggressively push to eliminate fire as a management tool. EPA's moves to lower the PM 2.5 standards have the potential to severely impact prescribed burning in Florida and throughout the nation. The PM 2.5 rules set standards and ranges of particulate matter in the air for the purposes of determining air quality and public safety. Currently, EPA's PM 2.5 rules use a benchmark of 12, which Florida's excellent air quality rarely exceeds. While not finalized, EPA has suggested moving the PM 2.5 index to a 9 or 10, which gives minimal variance from baseline natural air measures absent of human activity. Moving the index this far will undoubtedly limit the number of actual burn days in a given

calendar year. In some locations throughout the U.S., it could eliminate prescribed fire completely, which in turn increases the threat of wildfire and its severe impact on our nation's air quality.

*The Association strongly opposes rules which unrealistically limit land managers' ability to utilize prescribed fire as a cost-effective and efficient management tool. As Florida's population continues to expand and people move into forest-rich areas, it would be foolish and dangerous to eliminate our most effective wildfire prevention tool.*

## Labor Contracting

The United States Department of Labor is currently working on new regulations which have the potential to fundamentally change how independent contractors are classified by employers. Most notably, the proposed rules would require a contractor to calculate the hours worked for each individual client; in the event one client receives the predominant daily/ weekly work hours, the contractor would be considered a direct employee of that client.

*The Association opposes any proposed rules that would fundamentally change the contractor/client relationship. We believe all businesses should be able to contract out specific duties as best suits their business model, regardless of the hours involved.*

## FORESTRY FORWARD CLASS 14



Members of the Forestry Forward Class #14 kicked off their

two-year leadership program learning about their individual and collective strengths at Gateway College in Lake City, FL, on December 13, 2023. Led by the incredible John Hall of Promised Land Family Ministries, they delved into their talents, values, and motivations.

In January, the group will participate in the Association's Board meeting and legislative activities.

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## WORKING FOREST PARTNERS MEETING



Working Forest Partners (WFP) is a diverse statewide coalition with representatives from all aspects of the forest industry, environmental advocacy groups and governmental agencies

who share an appreciation of Florida's working forests and their significant benefits, such as their potential to be an integral part of the solution to our state's issues concerning water quality & quantity.

The group held its annual roundtable discussion on December 7, 2023, at the Goodwood Museum in Tallahassee. Co-chaired by Mark Milligan, the Association's TREEPAC chair, and Julie Wraithmell, Audubon Florida's Executive Director, the group discussed issues with areas of common interest and support. The group discussed challenges currently facing Florida forestry and brainstormed together to offer vital solutions.

"Even greater than the individual issues discussed is the discussion itself," said Association Executive Vice President Shelby. "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."

Many thanks to all the Partners and Association members who took part in this beneficial meeting!



*January 1 is the first blank page of a 365-page book.*

*Write a good one.*

- Brad Paisley

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## A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



Along with its blessings, 2023 has also held significant challenges for the forestry community. A major hurricane, mill closures, and other adversities have tested our resilience, tenacity, and determination. Despite the challenges, I truly believe that we will come out on top. The indomitable American spirit beats strong in all our hearts; we are resolved to adapt and conquer. We are committed to overcoming any obstacle to the sustainability of Florida forestry.

For me personally, the honor of serving as your president has been one of the highlights of my year and my life. Serving in this role as the Association celebrated its 100th anniversary made it even more meaningful. I look forward to serving another year!

The Association is proud to represent each and every one of you. We take our responsibility of advocating for you very seriously. As we have for the past 100 years, we will continue to work on the local, state, and federal levels to create positive outcomes for the forestry community, no matter what the challenge.

I pray that this coming year brings you peace and joy. May 2024 be a year of prosperity, filled with unexpected blessings.

Thank you all for the opportunity to serve you and thanks to all for making the Association what it is today.

## SOUTHERN FORESTRY ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES (SFAE) MEET IN ALABAMA



Executives and communications professional from forestry associations across the South gathered in Montgomery, AL, in November. This annual meeting allows participants to collaborate on effective solutions for shared challenges.

## WANT MORE BUCKS?



Saving money is always a good thing! Partnering with Outdoor Underwriters, Inc., the Association offers our members special reduced rates for liability insurance for hunting leases and timberland. Contact our office for more information (850.222.5646 or Info@FLForestry.org).

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