



Legislative Report: 3.4.22

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The end is near... Well, maybe!

The legislature is still worming through business on Friday of week 8. This week has seen a significant amount of “floor” time for the legislature as larger policy bills have been debated.

HB 005 Reducing Fetal and Infant Mortality by Rep. Grall passed both the full House and full Senate this week after hours of debate, questions and failed amendments. In addition, the Senate passed their version of new congressional maps this week; the House took up the Senate bill, amended their maps to the bill and sent it back to the Senate after a lengthy floor debate. The ball is now in the Senate’s court to either pass the House maps or send the bill back to the House. Either way it may not matter as Governor DeSantis has indicated he would veto any congressional plans which did not align with the maps he submitted. For the record, none of the legislative options currently being discussed align to the Governor’s map.

Adding to the log jam is this pesky budget which Senate and House leaders continue to iron out. Although not unusual, there large budget items in the education, health care and transportation spaces which the two chambers have yet to agree on. Closer to home, it isn’t every session where a large policy/ budget issue in the agriculture and environment silo holds up progress. Nevertheless, SB 2508 is certainly still an impediment to landing a balanced budget.

Environmental Resources (SB 2508) Appropriations Committee/ Sen. Ben Albritton:

Although, amended from its original text, SB 2508 remains our goal post for water supply and restoration in South Florida and Specifically the Everglades. This legislation contains a host of provisions which are important to Association members and should be important to all Floridians. As amended the legislation:

- 1). Expands authority under Rural and Family Lands to include “fee simple” as well as less-than-fee acquisitions. In addition, it creates a linkage between Rural and Family Lands and the Florida Wildlife Corridors.
- 2). Gives the Florida Department of Environmental protection the ability to contract with public entities to expedite Section 404 reviews.
- 3) Reenacts chapter 570.93 F.S. relating to agricultural irrigation systems cost-share programs.
- 4). Requires South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to certify its recommendation to the Army Corp of Engineers do not diminish the quality or quantity of water available to existing legal users and will continue to adapt to meet the needs of the restored natural system and requires water shortages within the Lake to be managed pursuant to rule in effect on January 1, 2022.
- 5). Clarifies that specific funding for Everglades Restoration projects including the EAA Reservoir, Lake Okeechobee Restoration Project, C-43 Reservoir Project and THE Indian River Lagoon South project shall be authorized.

Wrapping this back to the budget, the changes to Rural and Family Lands come with a \$300 million investment into the program with the funds being available January 1, 2023. In addition, and based on the Senate budget position, \$320 million in Everglades Restoration dollars are specifically tied to the passage of SB 2508.

Needless to say, there is work to still be completed and time is getting shorter as the final budget needs to be on the members' desk by Tuesday if the legislature intends to adjourn on Friday, March 11th, the scheduled end of session.

Fish and Wildlife Commission (SB 494/HB 323) Sen. Travis Hutson/ Rep Tyler Sirois:

On Thursday, the House brought up the Senate version of this bill, which is the Fish and Wildlife Commission omnibus agency package. They stripped out the problematic language dealing with gopher tortoise mitigation and replaced the language with the House version. As a reminder, the House version was the work product of the Association and several other stakeholders who shared concerns with the Senate approach and potential government mitigation sites deflating the market and directly competing with private recipient sites.

SB 1186/ HB 717 Agritourism (Sen. Ben Albritton/ Rep. Josie Tomkow):

Both the Senate and House bills have made it through their respective committees of reference. The Senate bill was passed by the full Senate this week and is currently awaiting House action. This legislation makes two clarifications to Florida's Agritourism Law. First, the bill prohibits denial or revocation of the agricultural property tax classification solely on the basis of the underlying agritourism activity. Secondly, the bill creates specific guidance for the taxation of nonresidential structures which are integral to the farm or agritourism activity. The bill further requires those nonresidential structures be assessed at the just value and added to the agricultural value of the land.

As session winds down and tempers wind up, it seems appropriate to close the loop on an issue covered in early updates. It is by far the sweetest topic in recent updates. This week the Legislature passed the Strawberry Shortcake legislation, so it is on its way to the Governor. Although the victory is certainly sweet, there were a few sour moments as the Key Lime Pie Caucus tried to wedge into the bill. Additionally, advocates for blueberries tried to squeeze in but were ultimately left to die on the bush.

As we move into the final week of session, the Association will be focused on final budget agreements and the last bills which remain in play. Following session, we will update the members with a full postmortem of bills which passed, died or simply were lost in the process.