

Media Contacts:
Dr. Susan A. MacManus
Distinguished University Professor and Project Director
Direct phone: (813) 503-0561 | macmanus@usf.edu

Angela Crist
Director, Florida Institute of Government
Direct phone: (813) 857-8801 | acrist@usf.edu

Tampa, Fla. (October 17, 2017)

Floridians favor protecting one of state’s biggest assets—the environment; perceived threats vary significantly by region, Millennials elevating issue

By Susan A. MacManus, *Project director*

The 2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey finds the environment to be one of the top five issues facing Florida for the third year in a row.¹ Floridians judge the **biggest environmental problems facing the state to be loss of land for wildlife (20%), invasive species (17%), water-related problems (16%), rising sea levels (15%), and hazardous waste/landfills (11%).**

A majority wants the State to do a better job protecting this important asset, and 56% support a new tax earmarked to environmental protection efforts. At the same time, about half of Floridians think that the state is doing about right renourishing beaches and a sizable portion admits to not knowing much about wind turbines.

Biggest environmental problem? It depends on where you live.

Floridians are divided in their assessments of Florida’s biggest environmental problem today. Among the most often cited is “loss of natural lands for wildlife.” Attention to this issue has escalated for two reasons: high levels of growth and development in certain parts of the state and the backlash from how Amendment 1 funds approved by voters in 2014 for land and water conservation were spent by the Legislature (some say that not enough was spent to buy environmentally sensitive lands).

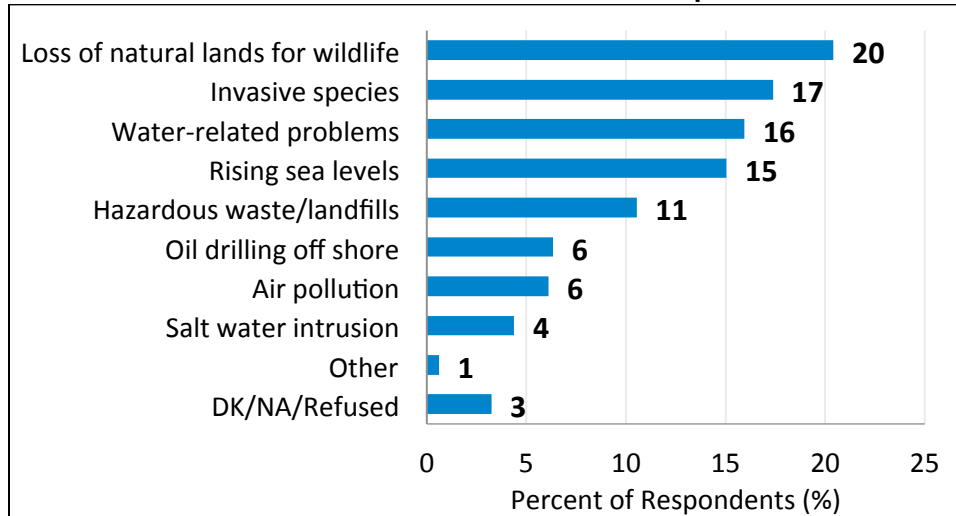
Opinions about the state’s biggest environmental problem vary by region. For example, “invasive species” is a bigger environmental threat to residents of North Florida (22%) where the venomous Lionfish² that eat native fish threaten large fishing (commercial and sport)

¹ 6% in 2015; 13% in 2016; 13% in 2017.

² Associated Press, WKRG, “Invasive Fish Roundup Concludes Today,” September 4, 2017, <http://wkrg.com/2017/09/04/invasive-fish-roundup-concludes-today/>; Sarah Hollenbeck, “Lionfish Threaten Thousands of Fishing Jobs,” WTSP-TV, USA TODAY Network, September 11, 2015, accessed October 2, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2015/09/11/lionfish-florida-invasive-species/72072488/>

industries, and the Tampa Bay area (19%) where a tiny flying insect (Asiatic citrus psyllid) has wreaked havoc on the large citrus industry.³

Floridians rate loss of natural lands for wildlife the top environmental issue



Question wording: “What is the biggest environmental problem facing Florida today?” (Order of response options randomized)

Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Source: Telephone survey of a random sample of 1,215 Floridians ages 18 and older conducted July 24-August 14, 2017. Margin of error ± 2.8%.

2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey

Regional differences: Biggest environmental problems

Top environmental concerns vary by region:
 Miami/Ft. Lauderdale: rising sea levels (30%); loss of natural land for wildlife (21%)
 Palm Beach: rising sea levels (27%); loss of natural land for wildlife (18%)
 Naples: water-related problems (36%); loss of natural land for wildlife (22%)
 Tampa Bay: invasive species (19%); water-related (17%); loss of natural land (17%)
 Orlando: loss of natural land for wildlife (22%); water-related (20%)
 North Florida: loss of natural land for wildlife (23%); invasive species (22%)

Less-cited concerns also vary by region:
 Hazardous waste/landfills: North Florida (16%), Tampa Bay (13%).
 Oil drilling offshore: Orlando (9%), Tampa Bay (9%).
 Air pollution: Orlando (9%), Miami/Ft. Lauderdale (7%).
 Salt water intrusion: Naples (10%).

Question wording: “What is the biggest environmental problem facing Florida today?” (Order of response options randomized)

NOTE: For a detailed list of the counties in each region, see end of Methodology Statement posted on <http://sunshinestatesurvey.org/results/2017/>

Source: Telephone survey of a random sample of 1,215 Floridians ages 18 and older conducted July 24-August 14, 2017. Margin of error differs for each region. Results for Naples based on a small number of responses and should be interpreted with caution. 2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey

³ Michael Joe Murphy, “Citrus Greening: Will a Signature Industry for Florida Survive?” *Orlando Sentinel*, June 15, 2017; <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-ed-bacteria-greening-hurts-florida-citrus-20170615-story.html>, accessed October 6, 2017.

“Water-related problems” (quality and quantity) dominate concerns of Naples area residents (36%), partially due to the proximity to Lake Okeechobee and the presence of a large agricultural industry (sugar cane). When the lake overflows and spills into the Caloosahatchee River, it upsets the salinity of the river and affects the sea life and fishing industry. Battles ensue between environmentalists who blame the sugar cane industry for polluting the lake and farmers who defend their livelihood.

“Rising sea levels” is seen as a bigger problem by residents of the Miami/Fort Lauderdale (30%) and Palm Beach (27%) regions. Studies have documented the impacts of rising sea levels there.⁴

“Hazardous waste/landfills” is a bigger worry to Floridians living in the more rural, but fast-growing, North Florida area (16%). They fear that the less-densely populated areas of the Panhandle will be prime targets for new landfills and hazardous waste disposal sites.

Floridians have become more critical of State environmental protection in recent years.

The share judging the State’s efforts to protect the environment as “excellent” or “good” was about the same as last year (37% to 38%), but positive ratings have fallen from 49% since 2012. What’s more, **60% give the State “poor” or “fair” ratings, with the sharpest increase coming in the “poor” ratings (15% in 2012 to 25% in 2017).**

The most critical of State environmental protection are the residents of the Miami/Fort Lauderdale (31%), Palm Beach (31%), and Naples (30%) regions. The most positive (“good” plus “excellent”) assessments come from North Florida (47%) and Tampa Bay (45%).

Age and schooling also matter. The most critical are those ages 55 to 64 (29%) and 65 to 79 (29%) and college graduates (28%). The most laudatory (“excellent” plus “good”) are Florida’s oldest residents, 80 and older (54%), Hispanics (47%), those with high school only (47%), and those households with an income below \$35,000 (42%).

Floridians say new tax earmarked for environmental protection is a step in the right direction.

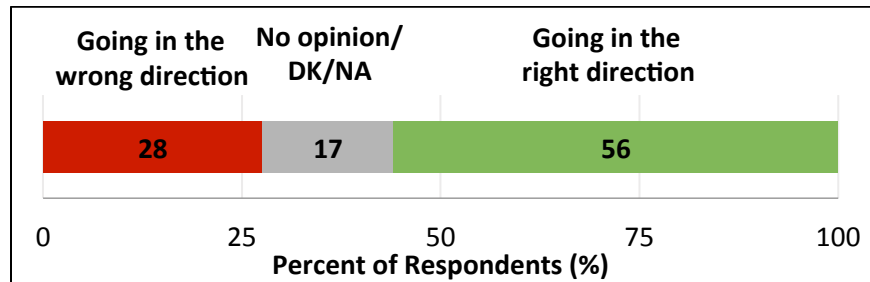
In a state with little appetite for new taxes⁵, **the fact that a majority (56%) of Floridians support a new tax to support environmental protection efforts indicates the growing importance of the issue, particularly among young voters.** The 18- to 34-year-olds are the most supportive (68%) compared with 48% of those ages 55 to 64 (the Boomers). This result

⁴ Dinah Voyles Pulver, Associated Press, “Sea Level Rise Is Accelerating in Florida, Scientists Warn,” July 22, 2017; accessed October 2, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/florida/articles/2017-07-22/sea-level-rise-is-accelerating-in-florida-scientists-warn>; Jenny Staletovich, “Miami Beach Flooding Spiked Over Last Decade, UM Study Finds,” *Miami Herald*, April 5, 2016, <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/environment/article70145652.html>, accessed October 2, 2017.

⁵ The state’s residents have consistently approved constitutional amendments lowering property taxes. Susan A. MacManus, Aubrey Jewett, David J. Bonanza, Thomas R. Dye, *Politics in Florida*. Tampa, FL: John Scott Dailey Institute of Government, 4th ed., 2015.

confirms what other research has shown—Millennials, now the nation’s largest generation, are accurately described as the “environmental generation”.⁶

Majority of Floridians say that creating a new tax to support Florida environmental protection efforts is going in the right direction



Question wording: “There are lots of issues facing Florida today. If the State of Florida were to create a new tax to support Florida environmental protection efforts, would you say that was going in the right direction or the wrong direction, or do you have no opinion about it?”

Source: Telephone survey of a random sample of 1,215 Floridians ages 18 and older conducted July 24-August 14, 2017. Margin of error \pm 2.8%.

2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey

State’s beach re-nourishment efforts about right, but still need to improve. Region, age matter.

Beaches are a big part of Florida’s economy—a draw to tourists and prospective residents as well as an income source to natives. Florida’s 1,350-mile coastline has 825 miles of sandy beaches,⁷ 411 of which are critically eroded.⁸ While 51% judge the State’s beach re-nourishment efforts as “about right,” nearly one-third (32%) believe “too little” has been done.

The most critical are residents of Miami/Fort Lauderdale (42%) and Naples (42%)—both heavily dependent on tourism and more susceptible to storm damages and coastal flooding.⁹ The most improvement-focused are Millennials (44%).

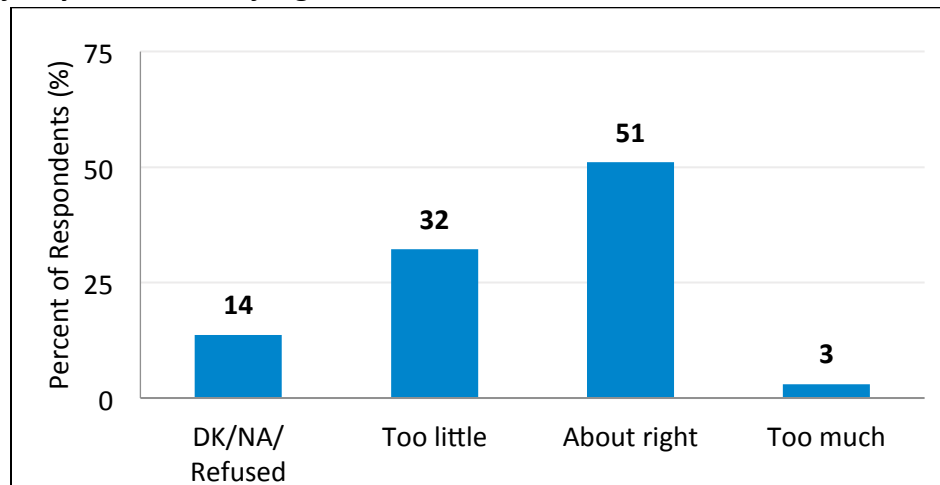
⁶ Monica Anderson, “For Earth Day, Here’s How Americans View Environmental Issues,” Pew Research Center, April 20, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/20/for-earth-day-heres-how-americans-view-environmental-issues/>

⁷ Florida Department of Environmental Protection, “Statistical Abstract: Florida’s Land Facts,” <http://www.dep.state.fl.us/secretary/stats/geographical.htm>, accessed October 2, 2017.

⁸ Florida Shore & Beach Preservation Association (FSBPA), “Beaches 2017 & Beyond,” October 3, 2016. <http://www.fsbpa.com/Beaches2017.pdf>, accessed October 2, 2017.

⁹ The State of Florida and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have shown “the most cost-effective, socially and environmentally suitable way to reduce storm damages and coastal flooding on most open coast sites occurs through beach nourishment.” FSBPA, p. 3.

Majority of Floridians judge State's efforts to re-nourish beaches as about right



Question wording: "Is the State of Florida doing too much or too little to re-nourish beaches, or is the State doing about right?"

Source: Telephone survey of a random sample of 1,215 Floridians ages 18 and older conducted July 24-August 14, 2017. Margin of error \pm 2.8%.

2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey

Wind turbines: Assets outweigh liabilities, but many Floridians are uninformed about them.

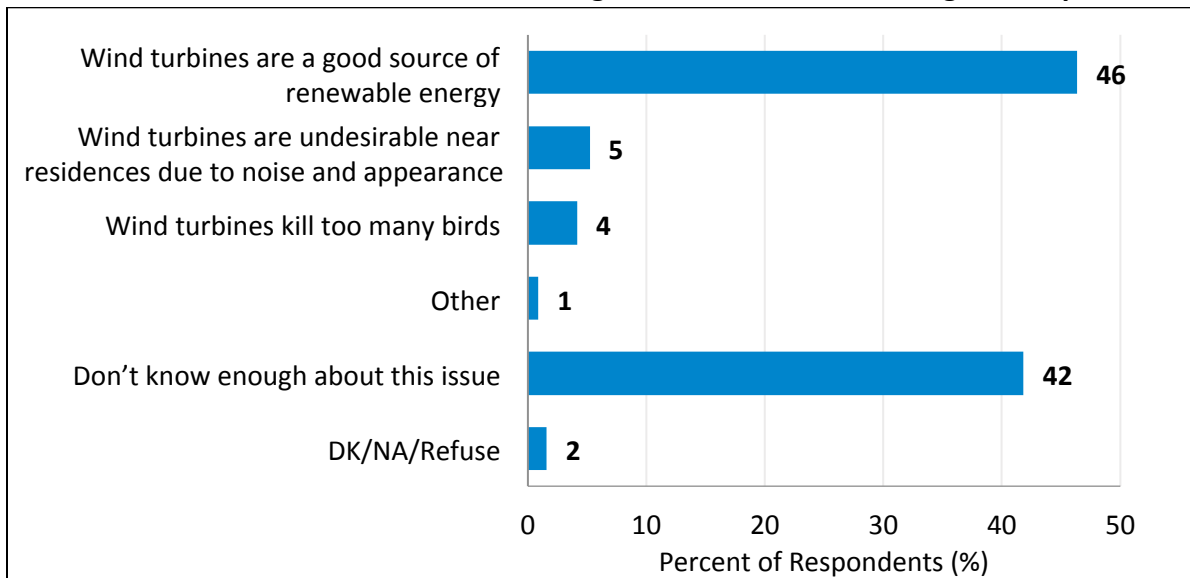
Almost half (46%) of Floridians report positive feelings toward wind turbines, saying they are a good source of renewable energy. Respondents who are most likely to favor wind turbines are 18- to 34-year-olds (57%), men (54%), and residents living in high-income households (53%).

But a high share of Floridians (42%) admit they do not know enough about turbines to give an opinion. The least knowledgeable are women (50%), those ages 65 to 79 (47%), African Americans (58%), and those living in a low-income household earning less than \$35,000 (49%). The lack of knowledge has two explanations. One is the much longer and more intense focus on *solar* energy both before and after voters defeated the confusing solar power-focused Amendment 1 (2016).¹⁰ Another is that Florida does not produce significant breezes in locations where wind farms could potentially be constructed.¹¹

¹⁰ Mary Ellen Klas, "Florida Voters Say No to Misleading Solar Amendment," Miami Herald, November 8, 2016. <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/election/article113449438.html>, accessed October 2, 2017.

¹¹ The U.S. Department of Energy released a report stating that wind power could be harnessed in areas currently without wind turbines by installing taller generators. Kevin Spear, "Department of Energy: Taller Turbines Would Bring Wind Energy to Florida," Orlando Sentinel, May 10, 2015. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-wind-energy-orlando-announcement-20150519-story.html>, accessed September 22, 2017.

Four in ten Floridians do not know enough about wind turbines to give an opinion



Question wording: “Please tell me which of the following statements best reflects your feelings about wind turbines in Florida.” (Order of response options randomized)

Source: Telephone survey of a random sample of 1,215 Floridians ages 18 and older conducted July 24-August 14, 2017. Margin of error ± 2.8%.

2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey

Related Question: See Detailed Analysis and Crosstabs: The Environment

Safety of Drinking Water: State gets relatively high marks: 58% say provision of safe drinking water is “good” or “excellent”—up from 52% in 2016. Highest (“excellent”) marks come from 18-34-year-olds (23%), persons with less than a high school education (22%), and persons voluntarily out of the work force (30%); lowest (“poor”) from those ages 35-54 (16%), African Americans (17%), and unemployed persons (19%).

Improving the environment dear to hearts of Floridians.

The 2017 USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey shows that Floridians continue to believe the environment is one of the top five issues facing the state. The biggest problems include loss of land for wildlife, invasive species, water-related problems, and rising sea levels, but the strength of respondents’ opinions depends on which problem most impacts where they live. Floridians have become more critical of the State’s recent efforts to protect the environment, and—despite historically disapproving new taxes—more than half (especially Millennials) support a tax that would boost protection efforts.

Interested parties may view results for all questions and detailed analysis, including questions not analyzed here and significant factors for all related questions, on the survey website:

<http://www.sunshinestatesurvey.org/results/2017/>

The USF-Nielsen Sunshine State Survey is a collaborative learning opportunity between the USF College of Arts and Sciences and The Nielsen Company, LLC., that allows USF students to gain valuable experience before graduation. Each of the students below made significant contributions to this year's Survey. Valuable input into the survey question content and structure came from all students in the upper-level Media and Politics class (Spring 2017).

Student analytic team

Ella Biggins

Neil Dalson

Nathaniel Sweet

Aida Vazquez-Soto

Student infographics team

Amy Benner

Georgia Pevy

—END—