

Leaders assess effect of climate change: Donalds among those in conservative group's tour of coastal areas (*The News-Press*)

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As go our barrier islands, so does the rest of Southwest Florida ... unless we do something.

And preferably something governed by conservative, free-market principles, or at least that's the message from a group of conservative climate change thought leaders who toured the Collier County coast with U.S. Congressman Byron Donalds of Naples Wednesday.

The day trip's goal: to look at the impacts of sea level rise and climate change in Donalds' coastal district.

After motoring along the Naples shoreline, the Edison Explorer tour boat passed through Rookery Bay to Keewaydin, the area's largest unbridged barrier island.

There, explained Florida International University geologist Randy Parkinson, accelerating sea level rise threatens not just island homes and wildlife but mainland residents as well, since barrier islands defend against storm surge.

Sponsored by republicEn.org a conservative climate think tank ("en" stands for energy, entrepreneurship and the environment) and the American Water Security Project and Audubon Florida, the group included Donalds' constituents as well as Florida Wildlife Federation's regional policy director Meredith Budd and U.S. Sugar vice president Michael Ellis.

On the way out, former South Carolina Congressman and RepublicEn Executive Director Bob Inglis pitched his vision of conservative leadership on climate action.

"Once upon a time," Inglis said, "Republicans and Democrats agreed on the need to act on climate change." But after the global financial crisis, "Republicans went away for a decade. During that decade, the left went further left, but now Republicans are coming back."

That's important, Inglis said, because climate change is real, and it's happening now. "The question is whether America can lead the world to solutions," he said. Instead of heavy-handed government regulations, Inglis favors market-based fixes.

"We think free enterprise can solve this problem," he said. "We think it's rock-solid conservatism to say we should be accountable for all our actions. Blessings flow from accountability; havoc results from a lack of accountability. Climate change is that havoc ... Once you make dirty accountable, clean looks cheaper. When people choose clean, the free enterprise system delivers innovation." In an interview after the trip, Donalds said he's all for clean energy, as long as it's not propped up by a tax scheme.

"We can go through a cap-and-trade or a taxing regime, but the other economies in the world are not going to do that," he said. "At the end of the day, one thing is clear: I am not going to be supportive of carbon taxes," Donalds said. "If you want to talk about saving the planet from carbon emissions, we

should be embracing nuclear ... Because you need to have consistent energy on the grid that is cheap, that is affordable and that is reliable."

Another discussion topic was water pollution, especially that caused by nitrogen-fertilized runoff that comes from both septic systems and aging or overwhelmed municipal sewage treatment plants.

"We are loving Florida to death," said Brandon Shuler of the American Water Security Project. "We have a thousand new Floridians move into the state every day and as these folks come in we've got to find housing for them and the cheapest, easiest alternative is septic tanks instead of a centralized sewer system (and) we're looking at aging and failing wastewater systems. ... We've got to have the money to get all of our systems upgraded."

Donalds acknowledged the huge costs of such upgrades, but says that's an appropriate use of government money. Because wastewater plants are government facilities, "It is a responsibility that government's going to have to figure out.

"That is something the government can help with," he said. "It is expensive ... but we have to take a look at it because the truth is we can't have municipalities dumping raw sewage in our waterways because their wastewater treatment can't handle it. But it's going to be a collaborative effort."

Though Donalds said he may not necessarily agree with everything his boatmates were advocating, he said it's important to him to listen to others. "My door is always open ... We'll engage with everybody."

After that, he said, "What I'm going to do is look at all the plans, sit down and try to construct what I think is going to be in the best interests of Southwest Florida, what's going to be in the best interests of the state and what's going to be in the best interests of the country."

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