

Will Gov. DeSantis Hire Another Florida Climate Change Czar?

December 25, 2020



DEP Secretary Noah Valenstein on the Santa Fe River, with OSFR then-President Pam Smith in background. Photo by Jim Tatum

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two weeks, it also did not answer questions about how much time he devotes to chief resilience officer duties, whether he keeps a schedule, whether any staffers have been assigned to the work and whether, after most of a year, he believes Florida needs a full-time resilience officer.

The Department further did not provide examples of work Valenstein has completed in the role that he would not have taken on as the state's environmental secretary. He oversees an agency with a \$2.2 billion budget and more than 2,600 employees, according to the budget tracking website Transparency Florida

DeSantis is not a communicator nor does he run a government of transparency. He does not respond to letters nor questions.

Read the original article [here at WLRN News](#).

*Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.
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– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

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WLRN 91.3 FM | By [Zachary T. Sampson](#)

Published December 17, 2020 at 10:44 AM EST

For almost seven months, Florida had a dedicated leader on climate change. Then she left for another job.

The state has now gone longer than that without a full-time replacement.

Environmental advocates celebrated Gov. Ron DeSantis's hiring of Julia Nesheiwat for the newly created position of chief resilience officer in summer 2019. They saw the move as a declaration his office would accept, and try to address, the realities of climate change in a vulnerable state.

Now some wonder about that commitment.

"We were so excited about it because it acknowledged what we were doing," said Hank Hodde, Pinellas County's sustainability and resiliency coordinator. "If the position isn't backfilled, it just seems like it's business as usual, and it was for show."

A spokesman for DeSantis acknowledged but did not respond to two emails and two text messages asking whether the governor plans to fill Nesheiwat's full-time position running the state's response to sea level rise.

Nesheiwat stepped down in February to take a homeland security job in the Trump administration. For most of 2020 at least some of her responsibilities were supposed to be shifted to Noah Valenstein, the secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection.

Nesheiwat's most visible accomplishment was a 36-page report summarizing attempts at studying and adapting to sea level rise across Florida. She called the state's work "disjointed," with regional collectives and flood-prone municipalities taking the lead. To the frustration of environmentalists, she did not detail what can be done to reduce fossil fuel emissions that contribute to climate change.

Exactly how the state has continued Nesheiwat's work is unclear. The Department of Environmental Protection did not make Valenstein available for an interview. Despite repeated requests made by email and in phone conversations over the past two

weeks, it also did not answer questions about how much time he devotes to chief resilience officer duties, whether he keeps a schedule, whether any staffers have been assigned to the work and whether, after most of a year, he believes Florida needs a full-time resilience officer.

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The environmental department's Resilient Coastlines Program works on climate issues, such as steering grant money to local projects, Hodde said. But since Nesheiwat left, he said, he has not heard from the secretary or anyone with an obvious line to the governor.

"There has not been any interaction with anybody at a leadership-level position," Hodde said. More discussion would ensure local governments are working to the same standards, he said.

The state could arrange a repository for best practices and peer support, according to Hodde, which was one of Nesheiwat's goals. She visited Pinellas during her tour of Florida.

In Southeast Florida, Broward County resilience officer Jennifer Jurado said, Valenstein has sought local officials' insight on a new law that will require builders to conduct sea level rise studies before undertaking certain publicly funded construction.

"I'm a huge fan of Secretary Valenstein," she said. Nesheiwat was more present on the ground, she said, something Jurado acknowledged could have simply been a result of her trying to learn a new policy landscape, which Valenstein does not have to

do.

“She was everywhere all the time, and she was incredibly responsive to requests,” Jurado said. “There’s no way unless that is your full-time job to be a physically present partner.”

Former state Sen. Tom Lee, a Thonotosassa Republican whose wife is DeSantis’ secretary of state, said 2020 is too bizarre to criticize the governor for not finding a full-time replacement.

“We’ve lost this year to COVID-19,” Lee said. “It has literally blocked out the sun in terms of how it has impacted government.”

Lee failed to pass a law last spring that would have made the chief resilience officer position permanent. After the measure died in the House of Representatives, he said he believed someone “put their thumb on the scale” to kill the bill.

But he now says the pandemic has left Florida with big budget holes, and absorbing the role into an agency like the Department of Environmental Protection or forming a working group with a chairperson could be its future.

Part of the power of Nesheiwat’s position was how she reported straight to the governor and operated outside any single agency. Across the state, local chief resilience officers have sometimes held multiple titles, in charge of parts of public works, sustainability or growth management.

Far more important than a singular title, Jurado said, are resources.

“She didn’t have any staff,” Jurado said of Nesheiwat. “It’s one thing to have a figurehead, but you’re just a figurehead without arms if you don’t have any staff.”

Wherever the job lands, the state must create a budget and clear

mission, said Dawn Shirreffs, Florida director of the Environmental Defense Fund.

“If the DEP secretary has the authority and the support of the administration to really bring the sister agencies to the table, there could be a path forward,” Shirreffs said. “It is difficult for us to take collective action because everyone is moving a different part of the needle.”

Advocates will watch next spring to see if a bill similar to the one Lee pushed will resurface in the Legislature. Rep. Ben Diamond, a St. Petersburg Democrat, said he is interested in creating a permanent resilience office...

This story was produced in partnership with the Florida Climate Reporting Network, a multi-newsroom initiative founded by the Miami Herald, the South Florida Sun Sentinel, The Palm Beach Post, the Orlando Sentinel, WLRN Public Media and the Tampa Bay Times.