

Bush (the other Bush) signs Babcock Ranch, alternative fuel bills

With continual hurricanes Florida needs more hurricane-proof nuclear plants

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Floridians will get rebates on energy-efficient appliances, a new commission will chart the state's energy future and a 74,000 acre nature preserve in southwest Florida is set for purchase under bills signed Monday by Gov. Jeb Bush.

Bush signed the Florida Energy Act at a Tampa groundbreaking ceremony for the state's first ethanol production plant. Ethanol, a fuel additive made from distilled crops, is one of the alternative energy sources targeted in the state's \$100 million incentive package.

Earlier in the day, Bush visited Punta Gorda to sign a bill approving \$310 million to purchase about 74,000 acres of the Babcock Ranch property in Lee and Charlotte counties from developer Syd Kitson.

Bush signed the Babcock Preservation Act on Monday, despite warnings that a Florida Sierra Club legal challenge filed Friday against Kitson's proposed development could endanger the deal. The Sierra Club wants a judge to consider scaling down the proposed development to about half the proposed 45,000 residents.

Bush said the Sierra Club is jeopardizing the state's conservation efforts.

"I'm really disappointed," Bush said. "The net effect of this is the ranch, all of the ranch, could be sold for private development."

Frank Jackalone, a Sierra Club spokesman, applauded Bush for approving the Babcock purchase. But he said dropping in a city of 45,000 next to the preserve negates the environmental gains of protecting the undeveloped land.

"There's nothing radical about saying the new town should be closer to 20,000 people, not 50,000," Jackalone said. "This doesn't jeopardize the purchase at all. Kitson could still make a big profit working on a smaller scale."

Under an agreement with the state, Kitson keeps about 15,000 acres for himself. While the state will keep its property undeveloped and open for public recreation, Kitson plans to build a new city with schools, stores, greenways and hurricane-resistant homes.

The Florida Energy Act also has drawn criticism from environmental activists who object to a provision that speeds the approval process for building nuclear power plants. Bush said the state can't ignore a potentially inexpensive power source.

"It should be done thoughtfully, but it should not be prohibited," Bush said.

Another part of the energy act offers homeowners two tax breaks: a sales tax holiday in October on energy-efficient appliances, such as ceiling fans, light bulbs and dishwashers, and a year-round tax rebate of up to \$5,000 for homeowners who buy solar-energy products, like water and pool heaters.

The law creates an independent commission that advises lawmakers on an in-depth energy policy. **The bill also provides grants for research into the development of**

alternative fuel vehicles, renewable energy systems and production of alternative fuels such as biodiesel and ethanol.

Bush said the fuels will help America break its reliance on foreign oil.

Bush praised U.S. EnviroFuels LLC, a Tampa company that plans to build the state's first ethanol production facility on the site of the bill signing in the Port of Tampa. He said Florida can take a leading role in the creation of alternative fuels and also as a supplier of the sugar and corn used to create ethanol.

After the ceremony, Bush's handshaking was interrupted by a New Port Richey woman who shouted a call for Bush to do something about soaring rate hikes imposed by Citizens Property Insurance, the state's insurer of last resort.

Nicole Deg, 30, said her premiums have increased from \$750 to \$1,750 in four years. Bush spoke to Deg for several minutes, but made no promises.

"He said it wasn't political, but it is," Deg said. "I wish it wasn't. It is going to take action by the governor, the most powerful person in the state."