

Crist makes property insurance an election issue



By BRENDAN FARRINGTON

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Democrat [Charlie Crist](#) said Thursday he successfully reduced rising property insurance rates as governor and will do so again if elected, vowing to repeal a law enacted under Republican Gov. [Rick Scott](#) that he said provides weaker coverage at a higher price.

It's a familiar theme for Crist, who campaigned in 2006 on a pledge to lower insurance rates that were skyrocketing after eight hurricanes battered Florida in two years. One of his first acts as governor was to call a special session to deal with rising rates. Lawmakers expanded the amount of state-sponsored reinsurance, which brought down costs for private carriers, and froze rates by the state-created Citizen's Property Insurance Corp., which took on more policies as national companies backed away from Florida.

"Rates fell a full 10 percent over the course of my term. We saved Florida families thousands of dollars. [Rick Scott](#), unfortunately, had different priorities," Crist said. "He took office and signed legislation the insurance companies wanted."

Minutes after Crist's announcement, the Office of Insurance Regulation announced that it approved the removal of 428,000 policies from Citizens to private companies. In all, nearly 900,000 policies have been approved for removal as the state tries to reduce the number of Citizens policies. Customers can choose to remain with Citizens.

Under Crist, who was then a Republican government, industry experts warned that Citizens was overexposed and the state was gambling that no hurricanes would hit Florida. If a major hurricane had hit, Citizens, with more than a million policies, may not have been able to cover all claims and assessments would have been added to all Florida policies to cover the shortfall.

And some of the rate increases under Scott can be put on Crist's shoulders. Crist signed a bill late in his term that ended a three-year rate freeze and allowed Citizens to increase premiums by up to 10 percent a year over several years in an effort to make it actuarially sound.

Scott signed a bill his first year in office designed to attract more insurance companies to Florida. Consumer advocates and legislative critics said it would raise rates by up to 15 percent while taking away benefits from customers. Crist vetoed a similar bill the year before.

Scott's campaign criticized Crist's insurance policies for putting more of a burden on state government.

"Florida taxpayers were left on the hook for billions and homeowners were left with fewer options to protect

their property," said Scott spokesman Matt Moon in an email to reporters. "Under Governor Scott, Florida has done the exact opposite, reforming and shrinking Citizens Insurance while giving consumers more choice and competition to protect their home."

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