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TOURISM

State urged to reverse decline

Tourism leaders move to boost the state's marketing budget after a recent drop in visitors to Florida.

By Christina Hoag

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Tourism industry leaders are mounting a campaign to convince state officials to cough up more money for marketing Florida as a vacation destination, after the first decline in visitor numbers in five years.

Those numbers dropped by 2.4 percent in the third quarter after a flat first half of the year, according to the Partnership for Florida's Tourism. The drop was partly due to lingering hurricane fears and beefed up marketing efforts by other states.

"This is a serious concern for the continued growth of Florida," said Donna Ross, president and chief executive of the Florida Attractions Association and chair of Visit Florida's board.

Tourism leaders want the state to increase Visit Florida's budget by \$34.3 million, to \$59 million, to mount more aggressive marketing campaigns, including network TV ads, and to keep up with increased costs.

"Although Florida is the number two destination in the United States, the Sunshine State has lagged behind Hawaii, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Texas and West Virginia for public funding of tourism marketing," said Robert Skrob, executive director of the Florida Association of Convention & Visitors Bureaus.

MORE FUNDING

Tourism leaders will lobby Tallahassee legislators and newly elected officials about the need for more funding, said Betsy Couch, spokeswoman for Visit Florida.

"It's a grassroots campaign," she noted.

Visit Florida's marketing budget has remained relatively flat since the agency's inception in 1997, but advertising costs have risen 37 percent, he said.

COMPETITION

Florida also needs to keep up with international competition. The number of visitors from Britain, the second source for overseas tourists, is expected to drop by nearly 5 percent this year.

Visit Florida pointed to increased marketing efforts by countries such as Spain, Ireland, Australia, Turkey and Morocco.

Florida has lost 1.6 percentage points in overseas tourism market share, according to Nielsen Media Research.