

Florida officials go into damage-control mode over Zika

August 6 2016, by Tamara Lush



A view of the outdoor business The Wynwood Yard that has been closed since last Aug. 2, due to the cases of Zika in the area, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016, in the Wynwood area of Miami. Thank goodness it's the slow season in Florida. At least that's what officials and representatives of the state's \$82 billion tourism industry are thinking in the wake of news that 15 people were infected with Zika in one small, trendy neighborhood in Miami. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

Thank goodness it's the slow season in Florida.

At least that's what officials and representatives of the state's multibillion-dollar tourism industry are thinking in the wake of the news that 16 people have been infected with Zika in a small, trendy neighborhood in Miami.

The outbreak has sent another chill through the Sunshine State's all-important tourism industry just weeks after the Orlando nightclub massacre and the killing of a 2-year-old boy by an alligator at nearby Walt Disney World.

Florida officials have gone into damage-control mode, with Gov. Rick Scott insisting, "We have a safe state!" during a tour of the Zika hot zone in Miami's Wynwood district.

Tourism is Florida's biggest industry. Visitors spent some \$89 billion here last year. And Disney is America's No. 1 tourist attraction.

Outside of a few business owners in the affected square-mile neighborhood, however, Zika appears to have done little damage to tourism so far.

"We have not had anyone cancel a trip to Florida because of Zika," said Jenny Cagle, [vice president](#) of Elm Grove Travel in Wisconsin. "It's definitely a conversation. People are talking about it."

Demetra Prattas, vice president of Turon Travel, a New York-based company that books art tours and trips, including the annual Art Basel festival that includes events in Wynwood, said: "I don't think it's a factor in deciding where to go. We've had no cancellations."

The governor has been on something of a statewide Zika tour, meeting with county health officials and [business owners](#) in Miami and along the Interstate 4 corridor that runs through Orlando. He said tourists should

use caution and not worry about mosquitoes, adding that Florida knows how to prepare for crises because of its hurricanes.

"We will make sure all the tourists feel comfortable coming to Florida," he said Thursday in Wynwood, site of the first mosquito-transmitted cases of Zika on record in the continental U.S. "We've got to continue to support these businesses because, why? They have employees and those employees need their jobs."

He said the state is doing everything it can to test people, spray against mosquitoes, get rid of the standing water in which they breed, and encourage people to use insect repellent.

The Visit Orlando tourism board issued a statement noting that no locally acquired cases of Zika have been reported in the Orlando area, which is over 200 miles from Miami. The board gave assurances that "safety is the top priority for our region."

The next few months will be crucial, said Henry Harteveldt, founder of the San Francisco-based Atmosphere Research Group, a travel-industry watcher.



A tour bus makes a stop in front of the Wynwood Walls, Friday, Aug. 5, 2016, in the Wynwood area of Miami. Thank goodness it's the slow season in Florida. At least that's what officials and representatives of the state's \$82 billion tourism industry are thinking in the wake of news that 15 people were infected with Zika in one small, trendy neighborhood in Miami. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

"If Florida is able to address this efficiently and quickly and be able to pronounce with confidence that they've been able to eradicate, there won't be long-term consequences," he said. "If Zika remains a long-term challenge, it's possible some potential tourists might think twice."

Federal health officials have warned pregnant women to avoid Wynwood because the virus can cause severe birth defects, including stunted heads. England's public health agency is advising mothers-to-be to postpone non-essential trips to Florida.

U.S. experts say expectant mothers planning a visit to the state should consult with their doctor.

For the most part, theme park visitors should be fine, said North Carolina State University entomologist Michael Reiskind, because the mosquito species most likely to spread the disease is less prevalent in Orlando and the theme parks are likely to spend heavily on insect control.

Kathy Torian, a spokeswoman for Visit Florida, the state's tourism arm, said anecdotally there were minimal cancellations in the wake of the Orlando shootings and the Disney alligator attack.

In 2015, 106.3 million people visited Florida, a record number.

Some tourists are shrugging off the dangers.

"I feel very safe in Orlando. The recent tragedies and even the Zika concerns have not deterred me in any way from enjoying my vacation," said a vacationing Tam Fuller, of Atlanta. "I keep my kids close to me at all times and stay aware of my surroundings, so I never feel unsafe."

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