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Crist backs off on using embryos, wants \$20M for stem-cell research

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TALLAHASSEE -- Gov. Charlie Crist on Wednesday jumped into the raging national debate over stem-cell research by calling for unprecedented state spending on the science so long as it doesn't involve cells harvested from human embryos.

Crist said he will urge lawmakers to spend \$20 million in state taxpayer money for stem-cell research -- the first time in Florida -- but only for studies that use cells culled from adults, umbilical-cord blood and amniotic fluid donated by pregnant women.

He said he hopes the action would help scientists achieve new medical cures for conditions such as diabetes and

Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases -- and do so without setting off a political battle in Florida.

"I know [stem-cell research] gives angst to some, particularly when we talk about embryonic stem cells," Crist said at a meeting with reporters and editors in Tallahassee.

"I think we can do it in a way that doesn't cause that kind of angst."

Crist's statements immediately landed the Republican governor, less than a month into his administration, in an ongoing national controversy that pits embryonic stem-cell research proponents' hopes for cures against outcry from right-to-life advocates.

The reaction was swift and stern from both sides.

Proponents of embryonic stem-cell research, including leading Democrats in the Legislature and prominent backers of the science, criticized the Republican governor's stand. They said Crist is backing away from a campaign promise to support the most controversial kind of stem-cell research -- the type that involves the destruction of human embryos.

"This sort of proposal is more political cover by the governor than anything that will really advance medical research," said Bernard Siegel, a Wellington resident and vice president of Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures, a group seeking through a constitutional amendment state funding for embryonic stem-cell research.

These backers say research already under way at the University of Florida, the University of Miami and the University of Central Florida would be given a shot in the arm if embryonic stem-cell research, now restricted from getting federal funds, received state money. They say other venues, such as Scripps Florida Research Institute in Palm Beach County and a Burnham Institute headed to Orlando, also might be able to host the research.

Critics of embryonic stem-cell research, including the Florida Catholic Conference, hailed Crist's move as an "ethical" compromise. And John Stemberger, president of the Orlando-based Florida Family Policy Council, said Crist should be "praised for his stand, which both advances medical research and protects the sanctity of life."

Proponents of embryonic stem-cell research contend those cells are promising in medical studies because they have the ability to reproduce into any type of cell in the body. Obtaining the cells necessitates destroying an embryo, and proponents say embryos can be used that would otherwise be wasted or destroyed at fertility clinics.

Stem-cell battles moved to the stases when President Bush froze federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research in 2001, restricting it to roughly 60 existing stem-cell lines, and last year cast his first veto against expanding such funding. With scientists declaring that some of the original stem cell lines are no longer of much use, state legislatures and citizens groups throughout the country are debating measures to underwrite the research with state money instead.

State Rep. Franklin Sands, D-Weston, and Sen. Steve Geller, D-Hallandale Beach, have filed legislation that would use \$20 million of state funds for stem-cell research of all kinds. A competing measure by Rep. Anitere Flores, R-Miami, that Crist likes would restrict the money to stem-cell research that doesn't involve human embryos.

"Crist is proposing a half-loaf approach," Sands said. "He has to explain to all those families of people with debilitating diseases that he's trying half-way to save their lives."

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