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THE GOVERNOR

Crist: Study select stem cells

Gov. Charlie Crist wants to spend \$20 million in state money on stem-cell research -- but in a move applauded by conservatives, the money would not be used for research on embryonic stem cells.

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TALLAHASSEE - Backing away from a stance he took during his campaign for governor, Gov. Charlie Crist said Wednesday that he wants the state to spend \$20 million on stem-cell research -- but not on the kind that destroys embryos.

While campaigning last summer, Crist said he supported embryonic stem-cell research and said he opposed President Bush's veto of federal legislation that would have paid for it. Backers of embryonic stem-cell research contend that it could lead to cures for such diseases as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.

Calling himself "pragmatic," Crist retreated from his campaign position Wednesday, instead proposing a grant program that would offer up money for other types of stem-cell research, including the use of adult, umbilical and amniotic cells. Crist conceded he took his position based on likely opposition to embryonic stem-cell research in the GOP-controlled Legislature.

"I want to do it in a way that we actually get something done," Crist said. "I don't want to just make a political statement, I want to make progress."

Stem-cell research has become an emotionally explosive issue that has pitted not only Democrats against Republicans but has split GOP ranks as well. A year ago, the Legislature shot down all stem-cell research proposals, but now Rep. Anitere Flores, a Miami Republican, has filed a bill that mirrors what Crist proposed.

Embryonic stem-cell research is performed on embryos from fertility clinics that would otherwise be discarded. Scientists believe stem cells show great promise of helping cure diseases because they can be manipulated to become any kind of cell type the body needs.

Dr. Pascal Goldschmidt, dean of the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, endorsed Crist's proposal and said it will give Florida institutions a chance to catch up with other states and countries already engaged in research.

"I think what Crist is trying to do is very smart," Goldschmidt said. "I think this is a bridge to an opportunity to advance the research."

But Democrats who support embryonic stem-cell research said they were disappointed that Crist was unwilling to fight for his own beliefs. During last year's campaign, Democrats portrayed Crist as a "waffler" who constantly shifted his stance on important issues.

"It's amazing he raised the white flag before the battle begins. That's kind of sad," said Rep. Franklin Sands, the Weston Democrat who has filed legislation to spend \$20 million a year for the next 10 years on all types of stem-cell research.

Some of those doing research on embryonic stem cells say there isn't a need for money to perform adult stem-cell research since the federal government is already funding it. Voters in California have already approved a \$3 billion initiative to pay for stem-cell research over the next 10 years.

Bernie Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute and a backer of a proposed Florida constitutional amendment to require the state to pay for embryonic stem-cell research, said Crist's proposal is meant to confuse voters.

"What we end up with is something that is sort of a political cover," Siegel said.

But religious groups who object to experimenting on embryonic cells praised Crist's proposal as the right ethical decision. And Flores, who says she believes life begins at conception, said the state's limited resources should be spent on research that she contends will yield results.

"Embryonic stem-cell research is a promise, not facts," Flores said.