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Florida May Vote on Stem Cells By [Kristen Philipkoski](#)

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Embryonic stem-cell research advocates in Florida have drafted a ballot initiative that would put \$200 million toward the science over the next 10 years, citing frustration with lack of interest in the promising field among federal and state agencies.

Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures, an organization formed to promote the new measure, must collect 600,000 petition signatures to get the measure on the Nov. 7, 2006, statewide ballot. The Florida Supreme Court must also approve the measure before it appears on the ballot.

"We're not going to underestimate the challenge but we think Florida, with its aging population, certainly needs the research," said Bernard Siegel, co-director of Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures as well as president of the [Genetics Policy Institute](#).

The ballot measure would mandate that "the Department of Health shall make grants for embryonic stem-cell research using, or using the derivatives of, human embryos that, before or after formation, have been donated to medicine under donor instructions forbidding intrauterine embryo transfer."

Members of Floridians for Stem Cell Research and Cures say they'll keep the effort simple, small and straightforward, hoping to avoid the red tape that has plagued [Proposition 71](#) in California. Other states like New Jersey and Illinois have allocated money for stem-cell research, but California thus far has the only successful effort to amend a state constitution to allow and fund embryonic stem-cell research.

"This is completely different than what they've done in California, where they created the [California Institute \(for\) Regenerative Medicine](#)," or CIRM, Siegel said. "(CIRM) of course has gotten off to a [bumpy start](#). We are focused simply on unmet needs of embryonic stem-cell research, (by providing) direct grants for that purpose."

These state ballot measures are in response to President Bush's August 2001 executive order allowing research on a limited number of existing stem-cell lines. Far fewer lines were available than he stated in that speech, and it turns out all of them are contaminated with mouse cells. But the president says he opposes further research on ethical grounds.

In a state where the president's brother serves as governor, those behind the effort recognize they have a challenge on their hands. But they're also confident that the state's aging population, which faces many diseases that researchers believe embryonic stem-cell science can address, will back the ballot initiative.

Florida Gov. Jeb Bush announced his opposition to embryonic stem-cell research in June at the [Biotechnology Industry Organization](#) conference in Philadelphia.

"The governor is opposed to amending the constitution to mandate science," said Deena Reppen, a spokeswoman for Jeb Bush.

Some religious and conservative groups are opposed to embryonic stem-cell research because researchers destroy embryos to derive stem cells. But the authors of the Florida bill say they've addressed ethical concerns.

"This is going to be a clear up or down vote on (embryonic stem-cell) research," Siegel said. "There are no hidden agendas with what we're trying to do, and we've set up proper ethical guidelines -- this really wears its ethics on its sleeve."

The measure says embryos used must be a gift to research, and that donors should not be financially induced, excluding "reasonable compensation."

[Louis Guenin](#), a bioethicist at Harvard Medical School, drafted the ballot measure based on a recent paper he published in the scientific journal *Stem Cells*. The paper outlines policy guidelines regarding stem-cell research that Guenin said could be adopted by any governmental body, including the federal government.

"I'm not out pitching this," Guenin said, "but I published my paper and I hope that will have some influence."



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