

**The Florida Senate**  
**BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT**

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

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Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Rules

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BILL: SB 7026

INTRODUCER: Agriculture Committee

SUBJECT: DACS Public Records Exemption

DATE: January 23, 2024

REVISED: \_\_\_\_\_

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	<u>Burse</u>	<u>Becker</u>	<u>RC</u>	<b>AG Submitted as Comm. Bill/Fav</b>
	<u>Burse</u>	<u>Twogood</u>		<b>Favorable</b>

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**I. Summary:**

SB 7026 provides an exemption from public records requirements for records containing certain information pertaining to the Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program (program).

The public records exemption would stand repealed on October 2, 2029, unless it is reenacted by the Legislature under the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

The bill takes effect upon becoming a law.

**II. Present Situation:**

**Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program**

Following the devastation of Hurricane Idalia in 2023, the Florida legislature passed CS/HB 1-C to provide relief to those affected by the hurricane.<sup>1</sup> The law established the Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program within the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (department) to make loans to agriculture and aquaculture producers that have experienced damage or destruction from a declared natural disaster. Loan funds may be used to restore, repair, or replace essential physical property or remove vegetative debris from essential physical property.<sup>2</sup>

Under the program, the department is authorized to make low-interest or interest-free loans of up to \$500,000 to eligible applicants.<sup>3</sup> An approved applicant may receive no more than one loan

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 2023-349, Laws of Fl.; HB 1-C (2023).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

per declared disaster, two loans per year in disaster loans, and five loans within any 3-year period. The term of each loan is 10 years.<sup>4</sup>

To be eligible an applicant must:

- Own or lease a bona fide farm operation that is located in a county named in a declared natural disaster that was damaged or destroyed as a result of such declared natural disaster; and
- Maintain complete and acceptable farm records, pursuant to criteria published by the department, and present them as proof of production levels and bona fide farm operations.<sup>5</sup>

The loan program expires on July 1, 2043, unless reviewed and saved from repeal by the Legislature.

### **Access to Public Records - Generally**

The Florida Constitution provides that the public has the right to inspect or copy records made or received in connection with official governmental business.<sup>6</sup> The right to inspect or copy applies to the official business of any public body, officer, or employee of the state, including all three branches of state government, local governmental entities, and any person acting on behalf of the government.<sup>7</sup>

Additional requirements and exemptions related to public records are found in various statutes and rules, depending on the branch of government involved. For instance, s. 11.0431, F.S., provides public access requirements for legislative records. Relevant exemptions are codified in s. 11.0431(2)-(3), F.S., and the statutory provisions are adopted in the rules of each house of the legislature.<sup>8</sup> Florida Rule of Judicial Administration 2.420 governs public access to judicial branch records.<sup>9</sup> Lastly, ch. 119, F.S., provides requirements for public records held by executive agencies.

### **Executive Agency Records – The Public Records Act**

Chapter 119, F.S., known as the Public Records Act, provides that all state, county and municipal records are open for personal inspection and copying by any person, and that providing access to public records is a duty of each agency.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> Section 570.822(3), F.S.

<sup>6</sup> FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(a).

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> See Rule 1.48, *Rules and Manual of the Florida Senate*, (2022-2024) and Rule 14.1, *Rules of the Florida House of Representatives*, (2022-2024).

<sup>9</sup> *State v. Wooten*, 260 So. 3d 1060 (Fla. 4th DCA 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Section 119.01(1), F.S. Section 119.011(2), F.S., defines “agency” as “any state, county, district, authority, or municipal officer, department, division, board, bureau, commission, or other separate unit of government created or established by law including, for the purposes of this chapter, the Commission on Ethics, the Public Service Commission, and the Office of Public Counsel, and any other public or private agency, person, partnership, corporation, or business entity acting on behalf of any public agency.”

A public record includes virtually any document or recording, regardless of its physical form or how it may be transmitted.<sup>11</sup> The Florida Supreme Court has interpreted the statutory definition of “public record” to include “material prepared in connection with official agency business which is intended to perpetuate, communicate, or formalize knowledge of some type.”<sup>12</sup>

The Florida Statutes specify conditions under which public access to public records must be provided. The Public Records Act guarantees every person’s right to inspect and copy any public record at any reasonable time, under reasonable conditions, and under supervision by the custodian of the public record.<sup>13</sup> A violation of the Public Records Act may result in civil or criminal liability.<sup>14</sup>

The Legislature may exempt public records from public access requirements by passing a general law by a two-thirds vote of both the House and the Senate.<sup>15</sup> The exemption must state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption and must be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the exemption.<sup>16</sup>

- It allows the state or its political subdivisions to effectively and efficiently administer a governmental program, and administration would be significantly impaired without the exemption;<sup>17</sup>
- It protects sensitive, personal information, the release of which would be defamatory, cause unwarranted damage to the good name or reputation of the individual, or would jeopardize the individual’s safety. If this public purpose is cited as the basis of an exemption, however, only personal identifying information is exempt;<sup>18</sup> or
- It protects information of a confidential nature concerning entities, such as trade or business secrets.<sup>19</sup>

General exemptions from the public records requirements are contained in the Public Records Act.<sup>20</sup> Specific exemptions often are placed in the substantive statutes relating to a particular agency or program.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Section 119.011(12), F.S., defines “public record” to mean “all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, tapes, photographs, films, sound recordings, data processing software, or other material, regardless of the physical form, characteristics, or means of transmission, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in connection with the transaction of official business by any agency.”

<sup>12</sup> *Shevin v. Byron, Harless, Schaffer, Reid and Assoc., Inc.*, 379 So. 2d 633, 640 (Fla. 1980).

<sup>13</sup> Section 119.07(1)(a), F.S.

<sup>14</sup> Section 119.10, F.S. Public records laws are found throughout the Florida Statutes, as are the penalties for violating those laws.

<sup>15</sup> FLA. CONST. art. I, s. 24(c).

<sup>16</sup> *Id. See, e.g., Halifax Hosp. Medical Center v. News-Journal Corp.*, 724 So. 2d 567 (Fla. 1999) (holding that a public meetings exemption was unconstitutional because the statement of public necessity did not define important terms and did not justify the breadth of the exemption); *Baker County Press, Inc. v. Baker County Medical Services, Inc.*, 870 So. 2d 189 (Fla. 1st DCA 2004) (holding that a statutory provision written to bring another party within an existing public records exemption is unconstitutional without a public necessity statement).

<sup>17</sup> *See, e.g., s. 119.071(1)(a), F.S.* (exempting from public disclosure examination questions and answer sheets of examinations administered by a governmental agency for the purpose of licensure).

<sup>18</sup> *See, e.g., s. 213.053(2)(a), F.S.* (exempting from public disclosure information contained in tax returns received by the Department of Revenue).

<sup>19</sup> *See Williams v. City of Minneola*, 575 So. 2d 683, 687 (Fla. 5th DCA 1991).

<sup>20</sup> *WFTV, Inc. v. The School Board of Seminole*, 874 So. 2d 48 (Fla. 5th DCA 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Section 119.15, F.S.

When creating a public records exemption, the Legislature may provide that a record is “exempt” or “confidential and exempt.” Custodians of records designated as “exempt” are not prohibited from disclosing the record; rather, the exemption means that the custodian cannot be compelled to disclose the record.<sup>22</sup> Custodians of records designated as “confidential and exempt” may not disclose the record except under circumstances specifically defined by the Legislature.<sup>23</sup>

### **Open Government Sunset Review Act**

The Open Government Sunset Review Act<sup>24</sup> (the act) prescribes a legislative review process for newly created or substantially amended<sup>25</sup> public records or open meetings exemptions, with specified exceptions.<sup>26</sup> It requires the automatic repeal of such exemption on October 2nd of the fifth year after creation or substantial amendment, unless the Legislature reenacts the exemption.<sup>27</sup>

The act provides that a public records or open meetings exemption may be created or maintained only if it serves an identifiable public purpose and is no broader than is necessary.<sup>28</sup>

An exemption serves an identifiable purpose if it meets one of the following purposes *and* the Legislature finds that the purpose of the exemption outweighs open government policy and cannot be accomplished without the exemption:

In examining an exemption, the act directs the Legislature to carefully question the purpose and necessity of reenacting the exemption. The act requires specified questions to be considered during the review process.<sup>29</sup>

If the exemption is continued and expanded, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are required.<sup>30</sup> If the exemption is continued without substantive changes or if the exemption is continued and narrowed, then a public necessity statement and a two-thirds vote for passage are *not* required. If the Legislature allows an exemption to sunset, the previously exempt records will remain exempt unless provided for by law.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>22</sup> An exemption is considered to be substantially amended if it is expanded to include more records or information or to include meetings as well as records. Section 119.15(4)(b), F.S.

<sup>23</sup> Section 119.15(2)(a) and (b), F.S., provide that exemptions that are required by federal law or are applicable solely to the Legislature or the State Court System are not subject to the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

<sup>24</sup> Section 119.15(3), F.S.

<sup>25</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b), F.S.

<sup>26</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)1., F.S.

<sup>27</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)2., F.S.

<sup>28</sup> Section 119.15(6)(b)3., F.S.

<sup>29</sup> Section 119.15(6)(a), F.S. The specified questions are:

- What specific records or meetings are affected by the exemption?
- Whom does the exemption uniquely affect, as opposed to the general public?
- What is the identifiable public purpose or goal of the exemption?
- Can the information contained in the records or discussed in the meeting be readily obtained by alternative means? If so, how?
- Is the record or meeting protected by another exemption?
- Are there multiple exemptions for the same type of record or meeting that it would be appropriate to merge?

<sup>30</sup> See *generally* s. 119.15, F.S.

<sup>31</sup> Section 119.15(7), F.S.

### III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

**Section 1** amends s. 570.822, F.S., to revise language related to the Agriculture and Aquaculture Producers Natural Disaster Recovery Loan Program. The bill creates a public records exemption for the personal tax returns, credit history information, credit reports and credit scores. The bill does not prohibit the disclosure of information held by the department pursuant to its administration of the program in an aggregated and anonymized format. The public records exemption would stand repealed on October 2, 2029, unless it is reenacted by the Legislature under the Open Government Sunset Review Act.

**Section 2** provides a statement of public necessity which is to shield the sensitive information of borrowers of the program from fraud and thieves. The bill also provides that the need to protect the sensitive information of those borrowing from the program outweighs the state's public policy of open government.

**Section 3** provides that this act shall take effect upon becoming a law.

### IV. Constitutional Issues:

#### A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

#### B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

##### **Vote Requirement**

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting for final passage of a bill creating or expanding an exemption to the public records requirements. This bill creates an exemption, thus, the bill requires a two-thirds vote to be enacted.

##### **Public Necessity Statement**

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires a bill creating or expanding an exemption to the public records requirements to state with specificity the public necessity justifying the exemption. This bill creates an exemption, thus, the bill require a two-thirds vote to be enacted.

##### **Breadth of Exemption**

Article I, s. 24(c) of the State Constitution requires an exemption to the public records requirements to be no broader than necessary to accomplish the stated purpose of the law. The exemption in the bill does not appear to be broader than necessary to accomplish the purpose of the law.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

**V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**

A. Tax/Fee Issues:

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

None.

**VI. Technical Deficiencies:**

None.

**VII. Related Issues:**

None.

**VIII. Statutes Affected:**

This bill amends section 570.822 of the Florida Statutes.

**IX. Additional Information:**

A. Committee Substitute – Statement of Changes:

(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

None.

B. Amendments:

None.