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Florida's 109 specialty license plates raise money, awareness

Florida's 109 specialty tags help raise money, awareness for causes

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For Beverly Kohn, the specialty Florida license tag showing a pink ribbon and the message "End Breast Cancer" on the back of her Honda Accord is a way for her to help raise awareness about a disease that has attacked her body three times since 1985.

"Pink ribbons fade over time, but the tag is permanent," said Kohn, 63. "I'm proud of being a breast cancer survivor."

Peggy Johannsen, 46, purchased the "United We Stand" tag to remind others about the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"This was a significant event to me, and I don't want people to forget it," said Johannsen, of Sunrise, who was working in Washington, D.C., at the time.

Thousands of Florida drivers purchase vehicle specialty-interest plates for different reasons — some for the look or to make a statement; and others to support an issue they are passionate about.

And in Florida, there's no shortage of messages and images to choose from: 109 specialty tags have been approved for use, supporting an array of causes from wildlife protection and the environment to college scholarships and charities.

Interest in specialty tags has been growing nationwide. Virginia offers more than 180 specialty tags, Tennessee 130 and Texas over 100. Specialty tags account for 10 percent of license plates in the state. About 4.4 million specialty Florida tags — raising more than \$93 million — were sold in the past three years, according to data collected by the Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles from 2005 to 2007. In South Florida, sales have jumped 9 percent since 2005, when 333,058 specialty tags were sold. In 2007, 364,347 were sold, raising \$364,347, according to a review of state data. Prices vary, but most specialty tags are sold for a \$25 fee.

School, wildlife tags popular

In Florida, the most popular specialty tags are those that support programs to help protect wildlife, including the panther, dolphins, sea turtles and manatees, data show.

The sale of all these tags raised \$17.1 million in the past three years.

Tags supporting higher education — such as University of Florida and Florida State University — are popular too, raising \$10.2 million from 2005 to 2007 for scholarships.

South Florida drivers have consistently showed their loyalty to local universities and supported tags that protect the environment. The "Protect the Panther" tag has ranked in the top five in recent years.

But how do you know how much of the money you spent on a specialty tag goes toward the cause you support?

Ann Nucatola, a spokeswoman for the Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles, said the state requires most of the organizations to submit documents showing how the money from the tags is spent. But information available varies by organization.

The Wildlife Foundation of Florida, a nonprofit organization, distributes the revenues from the "Protect the Panther" tag; 85 percent goes to the Florida Panther Research and Management Trust Fund and 15 percent goes to the Florida Communities Trust Fund, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The funding supports research and educational programs to protect the panther and increase public awareness. The panther tag raised \$6.7 million from 2005 to 2007.

Ed George, acting public affairs director for the Florida Communities Trust Fund, said the fund uses part of the revenues from the panther tags to buy land for parks, recreation preservation and historical uses. But the projects are recommended by local groups. Laura Goldsworthy, a retired teacher in Sunrise, said she purchased the "Animal Friend" tag because she knew the money funds programs that help with pets overpopulation.

"Thousands of animals are killed in shelters every year," said Goldsworthy, who owns five cats and a dog. "And some people can't afford to spay or neuter their pets."

More than 35,000 Animal Friend specialty tags have been sold since 2005, raising \$667,175. The funding is allocated to Florida Animal Friend Inc., a nonprofit that distributes money to help fund spay/neuter programs across the state. The organization has awarded dozens of grants — \$202,320 in 2007, according to the organization's tax returns — to local governments.

Revenues from the "End Breast Cancer" tag go to the Florida Breast Cancer Coalition Research Foundation, a nonprofit group based in Hallandale Beach. The money funds educational programs and research, said James Konschnik, the coalition's CEO.

"What set us apart is that the money stays in Florida," Konschnik said, noting the tags have raised \$2 million since 2002.

Kohn, of Fort Lauderdale, said she renews her tag every year, hoping her dollars will help researchers find a cure some day.

"When I'm driving and I see the 'End Breast Cancer' plate going down the road," Kohn said, "it just tells me that we are going to win this battle and that someone else agrees with me."

Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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