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Florida governor reaches outside state to lure jobs

- By John Kennedy
Cox Newspapers

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — A candidate in a sour economy, who is now **governor** in a still-recovering **Florida**, Rick Scott has made job creation his signature political theme. But lately, Scott has added a new tactic in his drive **to** add **jobs**: Poaching. **Florida's** Republican chief executive has sent letters **to** hundreds of business leaders in five states with Democratic governors, urging them **to** flee what he condemns as higher taxes and costlier regulatory environments and bring their companies **to** the Sunshine **State**.

Looking **to** make good on his 2010 campaign promise of creating 700,000 **jobs** in **Florida** over seven years, Scott's "one-way ticket" campaign is targeting companies in California, Illinois, Maryland, Connecticut and Minnesota for relocation pitches.

"They constantly seem like they want **to** raise taxes, raise taxes, raise taxes," Scott said. "That's great for us. They're making it more difficult for their companies **to** compete. We want them all **to** come **to Florida**."

Companies in California, led by Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, are among the most diverse and potentially lucrative in Scott's sights. But a spokesman for Brown's Office of Business and Economic Development shrugged off the impact of the appeal.

Besides, Brook Taylor said Scott's pitch was nothing new. Texas Republican Gov. Rick Perry attempted a similar come-on earlier this year with radio ads.

"Gov. Scott is not the first Rick **to** roll into town," Taylor said. "But when you're the largest job-creating **state** in the nation, it's no surprise people take notice. Still, no **governor** has poached his way **to** success when it comes **to jobs**."

Connecticut's Commissioner of Economic and Community Development, Catherine Smith, said that she was forwarded Scott's letter from a CEO in her **state**. "I can't tell how much this is about getting companies **to** move **to Florida** or the **governor** just getting attention."

Scott's attempts **to lure** out-of-**state** businesses come as many of his policies are seen through the prism of his burgeoning re-election campaign.

In signing the **state's** \$74.1 billion budget last month, Scott's letter accompanying the act boasted that he is close **to** the halfway mark on the 700,000 **jobs**.

The **state** has added 285,100 **jobs** since he took office in January 2011, according **to** the **state's** Department of Employment Opportunity.

Florida unemployment fell **to** 7.2 percent in April, that **state's** lowest rate in five years, down from 10.9 percent when Scott was sworn in.

By contrast, California's jobless rate was 9 percent in April; Connecticut's, 8 percent. Unemployment nationwide ticked slightly upward in May **to** 7.6 percent, said the federal Labor Department.

Scott, though, isn't aiming at states only with workforce statistics more troubling than **Florida's**. Only 5.3 percent of Minnesotans were without a job in April. But Scott seized on last month's decision by **state** lawmakers there **to** increase income taxes for the top 2 percent of earners.

Madeline Koch, with Minnesota's Department of Employment and Economic Development, said Scott's letters haven't caused a stir. Koch said she thought most Minnesota companies were content **to** stay in a **state** known for a strong workforce and good education system, qualities Scott challenged in his letter **to** executives.

But Scott, a multimillionaire former health care executive, said his sales pitch is simple — and direct.

“I’m saying (to companies), ‘Why should you do business in **Florida**? Why should you move your corporate office here? Why should you move your plant here? Why should you move your regional office here?’ ” Scott said.

Florida’s governor also insisted he wasn’t merely focused on **jobs** in states governed by Democrats.

“I tell people all across the country, my goal is to make this the No. 1 place where you can do business, where you can get a job, where your children can get a great education, and you can afford to live,” Scott said.

Florida’s lack of a **state** income tax, its improving education system, rise in housing starts and strong credit rating helped by reduced debt under Scott are all highlighted in the **governor’s** letters. But job creation is a relentless task for Scott, who has pinned his political career to it.

Economists forecast **Florida** is seeing the re-entry of thousands of workers who formerly had given up and disappeared from the unemployment roll.

“People are looking again, and they will start showing up as unemployed,” said Sean Snaith, a University of Central **Florida** economist. “That makes the unemployment rate go up, which would not be something Gov. Scott wants to see.”

Although he hasn’t landed companies yet from the recent feelers, Scott has had some big-ticket successes in getting companies to move to **Florida** or expand here.

Last month, he announced Hertz Corp. was moving its worldwide headquarters from New Jersey to Southwest **Florida**, bringing 700 **jobs**. Virginia’s Northrop Grumman Corp. is opening two design and research centers.

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