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FLORIDA

Tourism rises, but not enough

A one percent rise in tourism for 2006 was not enough to comfort industry officials, who hoped for a five percent increase.

Miami Herald staff and wire reports

ORLANDO - (AP) -- Florida tourism was up in 2006, but not as much as state officials wanted.

Despite a weak third quarter, the number of visitors grew by 1.2 percent to 84.6 million, officials said Friday. It was the fifth straight year of increases after a five percent drop following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Officials with Visit Florida, the state's tourism marketing agency, said it wasn't enough.

"Although visitation increased one percent in 2006, the state depends on a visitation increase of four or five percent each year to strengthen Florida's economic future," Visit Florida President and CEO Bud Nocera said in a written statement.

The flat year for the tourism industry was reflected in falling occupancy levels at South Florida hotels. Although 2006 room rates were up 11 percent in Miami-Dade County, according to a Smith Travel Research survey, occupancy dropped two points last year.

Hotels in Broward County and the Keys followed a similar pattern in 2006, as rates surged and occupancy levels dropped.

Visit Florida is trying to drum up support in the Legislature for more advertising money. The agency is requesting \$59 million, more than double the \$24.7 million in tax money it currently gets. Tourism officials say the cost of advertising has grown, and Florida's getting outspent by Hawaii, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Texas.

Visitor numbers were up 4.9 percent last year and 6.8 percent the year before but increased only .9 percent in 2003.

Visit Florida warned the state was poised for an annual decrease after 437,000 fewer people came in the third quarter. But the state rebounded with a 9.5 percent increase in the fourth quarter over 2005.

Each percentage point drop in tourism is \$37.2 million lost in general revenue collection, according to Visit Florida.