

[Print Article](#)[Print This Story](#)

Australia oil spill fuels debate here

By CATHERINE DOLINSKI

cdolinski@tampatrib.com

Aug. 21 was a mess for the oil industry.

That was the day an oil platform off the northern coast of Australia began leaking 300 to 400 barrels of oil a day into the Timor Sea. Reports are that the leak continues, fouling thousands of miles of ocean and threatening marine life.

The spill also poses problems for oil producers trying to persuade Florida's leaders to permit offshore drilling in state waters. Not only did the Australia spill make headlines, it was - and still is - occurring in a part of the world that industry groups had hailed as a hub of safe, high-tech production.

Environmentalists pounced, saying the spill proves modern drilling is unsafe.

The industry contends such events are rare and that opponents are guilty of distortion.

All of which raises the question: Could such an oil leak happen here?

Down Under

Bill Smith, an Indian Shores councilman, drew a bright line on Oct. 21 between the Australia spill and lifting Florida's ban on offshore drilling.

"Remember, that's 150 miles off the coast - not five or 10, as we're talking about," he told a House panel of lawmakers. "Moreover, drilling proponents have described this technology as safe, state-of-the-art, and the same as would be used here."

A week later, Pinellas County Commissioner Kenneth Welch brought up the spill again. "If that had happened off the coast of Florida, our tourism economy would be fatally wounded," Welch said during an energy forum at Florida State University. The Timor Sea oil operation, he said, "is using the same type of new technology that proponents are saying is very safe."

That drew a protest from Terry Cunningham of Lakeland, a 30-year oil industry consultant who told Welch he didn't know what he was talking about. David Rancourt, a lobbyist for an industry group known as Florida Energy Associates, deemed the issue one of misunderstanding.

This year, a pro-drilling coalition that includes Florida Energy Associates produced a brief declaring that "modern energy exploration is environmentally safe" and "new technology is environmentally protective." It also stated that "In Western Australia, visionary leaders are establishing the region as the sub-sea oil and gas capital of the Asia-Pacific, overcoming significant technical challenges through the innovation of undersea oil production technology."

Drilling supporters reportedly made similar statements this summer during public forums across the state. But Ryan Banfill, spokesman for Florida Energy Associates, said those words don't mean what opponents say they mean.

Misrepresented?

Banfill and Cunningham say "visionary technology" refers to sub-sea oil production. The oil platform that sprang a leak near Australia is a permanent above-surface platform - older technology that below-surface production methods would replace, they said.

"Since the Timor Sea leak started, ... opponents have mischaracterized this point," Banfill said via e-mail.

But the report from the drilling coalition also features explanations and illustrations of "jack-up rigs," temporary above-surface rigs used before the below-surface production phase.

It's the same kind of rig that was drilling at the site of the leaking oil platform off Australia.

Both Australia's government and the Thailand-based owner of the oil platform agree that the oil is emanating from the platform - not the rig. Beyond that, details remain sketchy; no one has confirmed the leak's cause.

In an interview, Cunningham said he thinks the spill likely "had something to do with the drilling - I do believe it was the rig."

That's not the point, he said. "The rig is only as good as the people who are on that rig. The root cause will be human error. No doubt in my mind. The people on the rig made the mistake, and that kind of mistake hasn't happened in the U.S. offshore oil industry in over 40 years. You don't have the same work force there that you do here."

But Cunningham had no specific information about the nationality or training of the Timor Sea crew.

Eileen Angelico, chief of public affairs for the U.S. Minerals Management Service, said the regulatory agency had no such details, either.

Florida Energy Associates continues to stress the newer, below-sea production methods the group is proposing for use in Florida's Gulf waters. But not everyone in the industry is ruling out above-sea platforms.

"I don't know," said Dave Mica, executive director for the Florida Petroleum Council. "Offshore near California, some entities have built an islandesque facility - including a waterfall and palm trees - that has everything disguised. Would XYZ community in Florida want something like that as opposed to nothing visible at all?"

In some locations, he said, leaders might accept a horizon dotted by a platform that represents "jobs, revenues, an American product that's going to help me keep the lights on."

Such a platform would have to meet higher standards than the platform leaking near Australia, U.S. regulators say.

Angelico said that kind of uncontrolled oil flow, or "blowout," would be "highly unlikely" in U.S. waters because her agency never would have approved the engineering design of the well leaking off Australia.

It's hard to speculate about what, if any, role the jack-up rig played in the Australia spill, said Kenneth Schaudt, an oceanographer and meteorologist who has done consulting work for the oil industry. Better context, he said, is the rarity of spills overall.

He cited findings by the nonprofit National Academies that platform spills account for 1 percent of petroleum in North America's waters; natural seeps contribute 60 percent.

Eric Draper, lobbyist for the Audubon Society of Florida, was unmoved. "Australia's a relevant issue because (the oil industry) claimed that drilling is now safe," he said. "And now we have the evidence, in Australia, which is a rig that was built only a few years ago. ... It's our job to take their claims and to unravel them, and that's what we're doing."