

McCollum, Sink unite on drilling

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TALLAHASSEE — The two rival candidates for governor, Republican Bill McCollum and Democrat Alex Sink, don't agree on very much.

But they clearly share common ground on an issue sure to dominate the political agenda in 2010: a proposal to lift Florida's ban on offshore oil drilling.

Both are willing to listen, though neither sounds very convinced that it's time to drill, baby, drill.

The proposal can pass without either's support, but if drilling proponents succeed, the next governor would decide whether to grant leases to oil companies.

Read their detailed comments closely — and decide for yourself who's more anti-drilling.

McCollum was born and raised in Brooksville, in then rural and largely unpopulated Hernando County. But when it comes to the question of lifting Florida's long-standing ban on offshore oil and gas exploration, he quips, "I'm from Missouri. You've got to show me."

Florida's one-term attorney general, who previously served 20 years in Congress before his two unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. Senate, says he has to be convinced that drilling for oil and gas can be done safely without harm to Florida's fragile coast and its tourism industry.

"Historically, I've opposed the exploration of oil and gas off Florida's coastline," McCollum said in an interview this week. "I did that when I was in Congress.

"But I'm open-minded. I'm a guy from Missouri. You've got to show me about the claims that this is going to be something that we can do without danger to the people of Florida or to the coastline — to what's natural out there. But I'm very cautious about that. I'm open to listening. But I've historically opposed it."

Sink, the first-term chief financial officer from Thonotosassa, said this to *St. Petersburg Times* political editor Adam C. Smith: "My strong bias is to not be supportive. And furthermore, just like so many things in the history of Florida, it kind of reminds me of the lottery. This is not going to be the answer in Florida for the next get-rich-quick scheme. It's just not."

Last year, when Gov. Charlie Crist followed Sen. John McCain's lead and dropped his previously unwavering opposition to drilling, Sink publicly chided him: "He's one person; he's one public official. I don't want those people in Washington to think all of a sudden that everybody in Florida supports oil drilling."

In this week's interview, Sink said Florida should instead focus on renewable energy sources like solar power because that would create "many more" high-paying jobs. Sink also said the recent rupture of a rig off the coast of western Australia made her even more concerned about the possibility of rigs off the Panhandle coast.

McCollum, too, cited the Australian accident: "I don't want an oil spill between 3 or 10 miles off the coast of Florida, like they had off the coast of Australia," he said. "I've got to be assured, before I support something like that, that modern technology would not permit that to happen off our coast."

As a Senate candidate in 2004, McCollum faced familiar criticism for what environmental groups said was a bad voting record in Congress. But he was very specific on drilling, telling the *Orlando Sentinel*: "As Florida's next senator, I would do everything in my power to make sure there is never any drilling for oil or gas off Florida's coasts, including a program to buy out oil leases in the gulf."

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