

Betancourt, Ruben

From: THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA [info@newsserviceflorida.com]
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CHOICE OF COMMITTEE FOR DRILLING STUDY 'SENDS MESSAGE'

By JOHN KENNEDY
THE NEWS SERVICE OF FLORIDA

THE CAPITAL, TALLAHASSEE, Nov. 13, 2009.....By ordering an environmental panel to study the wide-ranging effects of offshore oil-drilling, Senate President Jeff Atwater is “sending a serious message,” the committee’s chairman told the News Service of Florida.

While House leaders race ahead with workshop sessions building a case for drilling legislation, Atwater is tapping the brakes, said Sen. Lee Constantine, R-Altamonte Springs, chairman of the Senate Environmental Preservation and Conservation Committee.

“This study will be primarily about how best we can protect Florida’s resources, not about how much can we drill for and how fast,” said Constantine, whose panel will lead the review of offshore drilling.

But Constantine downplayed early speculation that the study’s sweep could effectively thwart House efforts to have oil-drilling on the table during next spring’s legislative session.

“We’ve been aware we were going to get this assignment for a few weeks and work is already underway,” he said. “But the Senate is not about to just listen to the oil-industry and experts from universities that get oil industry funding tell us about how great it is. Oil-drilling is far from being definite in Florida.”

Atwater also has a personal stake of sorts in the debate. The North Palm Beach Republican is the leading contender for the Cabinet post of chief financial officer, with House legislation on the subject earlier this year making the governor and Cabinet the board deciding oil-drilling leases and collecting fees.

In assigning the oil-drilling research to the environmental preservation committee, Atwater concluded there is no hurry to take up the issue. “This analysis will be driven by the need for a dispassionate review, not timelines or schedules,” Atwater said earlier this week.

Among the organizations working with the Senate panel are Florida State University’s Institute for Energy Systems, Economics and Sustainability, the Century Commission, and the Legislature’s Office of Economic and Demographic Research.

Also telling is which Senate panel did not receive the oil-drilling task: The Senate’s Committee on Communications, Energy and Public Utilities, which spearheaded the chamber’s effort to craft renewable energy and conservation standards last spring.

The legislation eventually collapsed amid a tug-of-war with the House over its demand for offshore drilling.

Atwater is expected to push for that committee again to focus on creating a new state energy policy through legislation separate from any involving offshore drilling next spring. The committee has drawn some scrutiny on the offshore drilling issue since chairman Sen. Alex Diaz de la Portilla's wife, Claudia, is a registered lobbyist for Florida Energy Associates, a Daytona Beach-based group of independent oil-producers.

The organization has 31 lobbyists working the issue in the Legislature and has contributed \$40,000 to the Florida Republican Party and \$30,000 to the state Democratic Party in the quarter ending Sept. 30.

Barney Bishop, president of Associated Industries of Florida, which is allied with Energy Associates, said he welcomes Atwater's effort to learn more about drilling – but remains convinced the measure will be approved.

"I think it's encouraging," Bishop said about the Senate's stance.

But as a statewide candidate, Atwater also may be wary of growing concern about drilling that is spreading mostly along Florida's usually Republican-leaning Gulf Coast. Thirty cities, counties, local chambers and other organizations have approved resolutions in recent months denouncing oil-drilling, the News Service reported this week.

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