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FloridaEnvironments.com

Environmental News from Florida's capital by Bruce Ritchie

Monday, October 26, 2009

Cafe owner launches effort against offshore oil drilling

By John Kennedy

The News Service of Florida

A Panhandle restaurateur said today he wants thousands of Floridians to hit the beaches to fight offshore oil-drilling along the state's Gulf coast.

Dave Rauschkolb, owner of Bud and Alley's and two other beachside restaurants in the town of Seaside, has launched an effort dubbed Hands Across the Sand, which is emerging as the first grassroots opposition to the oil-drilling effort led by Florida Energy Associates, a group of independent oil producers.

Rauschkolb's goal is to get Floridians to hold hands and literally form a line in the sand to oppose drilling.

The demonstration is planned for Feb. 13 – the Saturday of Presidents' Day weekend. Rauschkolb said the event will be accelerated if a special legislative session includes drilling before lawmakers are scheduled to convene in March.

Among the early supporters is former Sen. Jack Latvala, a Republican looking to return to the chamber he left through term limits in 2002. Latvala has promised to organize the Pinellas County protest in February.

"We've got 26 miles of beaches in Pinellas County," Latvala said. "We don't have a lot of money to hire PR firms or spread it around Florida. But we're going to have a lot of bodies on the beaches, and I think that'll say something."

"I think it will send a very strong visual message," said Rauschkolb. "I don't believe that a majority of Floridians want to have oil rigs off our coast. If we get people out, it will show that."

Rauschkolb developed a website - www.handsacrossthesand.com - to get word out about the event.

Florida Energy Associates has drawn support in the House for

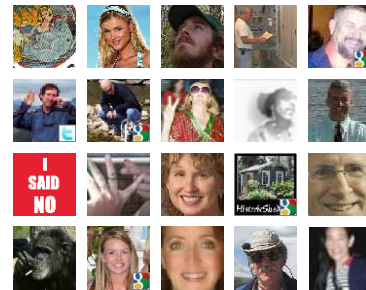
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drilling, where a measure was approved 70-43 last spring that could allow drilling as close as three miles offshore.

But the Senate refused to take up the proposal, which would have given the governor and Cabinet authority to lift the current ban on offshore drilling in exchange for Florida getting a share of future royalties from below the Gulf floor.

The Senate remains a tough sell. Senate President Jeff Atwater, R-North Palm Beach, has said he is uncertain about taking up the issue at all next spring – although the House is expected to push hard for action.

Future House Speaker Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, is leading the drilling drive, helping galvanize House Republicans behind the idea. But a rising number of Gulf Coast cities, counties and local chambers of commerce recently have approved resolutions opposing drilling.

Florida Energy Associates currently has enlisted 31 lobbyists and spent \$234,000 on its push last spring, according to lobbyist disclosure reports. Since then, the Daytona Beach-based organization has steered \$40,000 to the Florida Republican Party and \$30,000 to Florida Democrats, campaign finance reports show.

The pro-drilling side says the money drawn from leases is desperately needed to replace the billions of dollars in federal stimulus money that has sustained Florida's recession-ravaged budget, but which is on track to disappear next year.

Supporters also point out that drilling has been going on off neighboring Gulf states since the 1940s, mostly without serious accidents.

"There is a vocal minority out there opposed to oil exploration in the Gulf," said Barney Bishop, president of Associated Industries of Florida, the influential business organization helping spearhead support for drilling. "The opposition is certainly entitled to be heard. But they're not entitled to overrule the majority," he added.

Rauschkolb's organizing effort, though, shows that many along the usually politically conservative Panhandle are wary of steps that could threaten the region's economy, which is anchored by tourism and military interests. Elements of both sectors have voiced concerns about the threat drilling poses to area beaches.

Dave Pleat, a Democrat challenging Republican Rep. Marti Coley of Marianna, who supported drilling legislation last spring, helped prompt Rauschkolb's activism after the pair spoke earlier this

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About Me



Bruce Ritchie

Bruce Ritchie has covered Florida growth and environmental issues since 1993. He

previously was a reporter for the Tallahassee Democrat, the Gainesville Sun and the Florida Times-Union. He is a member of the Society of Environmental Journalists. Contact him at brucebritchie@gmail.com or (850) 385-1774.

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month at a campaign event.

“It’s bad for our economy and bad for our environment,” Pleat said. “There’s no upside to oil-drilling – and I’m a pretty conservative businessman.”

Posted by Bruce Ritchie at 3:59 PM



1 COMMENTS:

Larry VG said...

I'll be on the beach in Pinellas County on February 13th, and will urge as many of my friends as possible to be there, also.

October 27, 2009 7:22 AM

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