



November 3, 2009

FSU drilling symposium experts say risk is low

Tanker collisions, coastal storage facilities cited as being most troublesome

By Jim Ash

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Offshore drilling would pose relatively little risk to Florida's environment, according to academics and industry experts who participated Monday in a symposium sponsored by Florida State University.

Tanker collisions and coastal storage facilities susceptible to hurricane storm surges are more threatening than drilling rigs and pipelines, the experts said.

"Blowouts and spills are rare by design," said Norman Guinasso, an adjunct professor in the Department of Oceanography at Texas A&M University and one of the developers of the Texas Automated Buoy System, which monitors water conditions in the western Gulf of Mexico.

Guinasso described the 1990 explosion of the super tanker Mega Borg, which spilled 5.1 million gallons of light Angolan crude south of Galveston.

Half of the crude burned off and a quarter of it evaporated, leaving about 1.3 million gallons in the water. Predictions that the spill would mar Corpus Christi didn't pan out, but tar balls were reported as far away as Louisiana.

In 1995, another tanker collision spilled 2,000 barrels of oil south of Galveston. Guinasso said studies suggested the spills had little impact. Coastal tourism in Texas was worth \$12 billion annually in 2007, double its worth at the time of the spill, he said.

Kenneth Schaudt, an industry consultant who for 20 years served as lead oceanographer for Marathon Oil, cited studies that show that most of the oil released into the water, 62 percent, comes from natural "seeps" on the sea floor.

The symposium, which cost \$50,000 to organize, was sponsored by FSU's Institute for Energy Systems, Economics and Sustainability. Organizers stressed before the event that the institute takes no money from the industry.

But environmentalists, who were mostly absent from the forum, quickly pounced on the institute's claims of being honest brokers in the hottest debate in the Florida Legislature — a proposal by Republican leaders to lift Florida's two-decade ban on drilling in state waters.

"What we really need to look at is what's going on right now, where we see rigs actually leaking, like the one in Australia," said Eric Draper, a veteran lobbyist for Audubon of Florida, a chief drilling opponent.

Draper was referring to a dramatic blowout on a well in the Timor Sea off of the northwest coast of Australia that has been leaking an average of 400 barrels of oil a day for the past 10 weeks. Well owner PTTEP Australia was still attempting to cap it this weekend when the rig burst into flame.

Rep. Gary Aubuchon, R-Cape Coral, voted against a House bill this spring that would have given Gov. Charlie Crist and the Cabinet the power to grant leases. The bill surfaced in the waning days of session and was killed by the Senate.

After listening to the symposium, Aubuchon said his mind is still not made up. He said he still wants to know how the state would regulate safe transport and storage.

"One of the challenges I had was that it came up so quickly," Aubuchon said. "What protocols could we put in place to manage those challenges? I didn't hear that today."

Rep. Michelle Rehwinkel Vasilinda of Tallahassee dramatically broke with fellow Democrats to vote for the bill in the spring. Vasilinda said she supported the bill, which did not get a hearing in the Senate, only because it would have used oil and gas revenues to pay for renewable energy programs.

"I like the fact that we're having a more dispassionate review of the facts," she said.

If Florida decides to go ahead with offshore drilling, experience in federal waters and other states suggests that lawmakers should design an economic scheme that limits the amounts of leases that can be granted at any one time, said Kenneth Hendricks, an economics professor at the University of Texas who is considered one of the nation's leading experts.

That's the best way to encourage more competitive bids and get the best revenue for the state, he said.

"You should be thinking about as measured a pace as possible," he said.

Additional Facts

Florida Symposium on Offshore Energy - Part I: Oil and Gas

