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Cash cow or curse? Drilling experts offer familiar promises, warnings

Experts offer familiar promises, warnings

By Jim Ash

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Offshore drilling would bring 20,000 new jobs and \$2 billion a year to Florida, or it would doom a \$60-billion-a-year industry that draws millions of tourists to Florida's pristine beaches.

Proponents and opponents traded those familiar promises, warnings and a few sharp barbs Wednesday night in a two-hour debate broadcast live on television, radio and the Internet.

Sponsored by Florida State University and Gannett Florida, the parent company of the *Tallahassee Democrat*, the debate featured two expert panels who participated in an often freewheeling exchange before a studio audience of about 100.

"We've got a really good coastal economy right now. Why in the world would you put that at risk?" Eric Draper, a chief opponent and veteran lobbyist for Audubon of Florida, asked.

"There's not been an oil spill since I've been alive in the United States, and I was born in 1970, and there's 4,000 rigs," said a flustered Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Merritt Island, and the chief proponent of lifting Florida's two-decade drilling ban in state waters.

Opponents demanded to know all of the members of the shadowy Florida Energy Associates, the driving force behind the push in the Florida Legislature, a limited liability company that has hired more than 30 of the state's leading lobbyists to push for lifting the ban.

But they continued to be frustrated.

FEA's public face is Lance Phillips, a Republican Party activist and independent oil producer from Mexia, Texas, and Doug Daniels, an attorney from Daytona Beach.

David Rancourt, a panelist and lobbyist with Southern Strategy Group, said the rest of the partners are wildcatters, or independent oil explorers who need to stay silent to protect their competitive advantage. They will disclose their names as soon as Florida starts issuing offshore leases, Rancourt promised.

It's no different from the 1970s, when mystery developers began buying up vast swaths of Central Florida for what would ultimately become Disney World, Rancourt said.

"This is a very competitive industry," he said. "Disney came into Florida in a similar way, and look at the opportunities they created."

Opponents also raised the specter of vast refineries and storage facilities that would gobble up Florida's coast if offshore drilling were allowed.

"Now you've got a full coastline," said opponent David McLain, a member of Apalachicola Bay Riverkeepers. "Imagine that refinery in your back yard."

All of the Florida oil and gas would be processed in existing refineries in Gulf States, where production has fallen to 60 percent of capacity, Rancourt pledged.

"I don't believe you can permit a refinery in the state of Florida if you wanted to," Rancourt said.

Proponents continued to hammer away at the safety of offshore drilling, pointing to studies that showed only minor spills in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Opponents shot back with reports of recent spills, including a massive blowout in the Timor Sea off of Australia and recent tanker collisions in the Gulf of Mexico.

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