



November 22, 2009

Editorial: It's just not worth it

The News Journal Editorial Board has long opposed drilling within 100 miles of Gulf Coast beaches — even 150 miles, as proposed during congressional negotiations in 2006. Certainly not in state waters, within 10 miles of the coastline.

We see no reason to change that opinion.

The reasons remain the same: to protect the local tourism economy, the environment and the military training mission so dependent on large areas of the Gulf of Mexico off the Panhandle.

Tourism remains a key component of local economies across Northwest Florida. And by far the largest draws are the sugar-white beaches and the clean, clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

We see no reason to put any of it at any risk from offshore drilling.

Neither do chambers of commerce across the region, groups that might normally be expected to support drilling.

Even more important than tourism on the local economy is the impact of the military. And while right now it is hard to get a definitive statement out of military officials, the indications are that they don't want any drilling in their large testing range in the Gulf.

The issue is critically important to Eglin Air Force Base. So it's hard not to hear opposition to drilling, coming from civilians involved in Eglin's offshore testing programs, as coming straight from their military employers.

The regional chambers of commerce also cite concerns about potential impacts on military training in opposing drilling.

What about the potential for revenue from drilling? It would be welcome. But frankly, drilling proponents have greatly exaggerated the amount of money Florida is likely to gain from oil and gas production. Revenues to Texas and Alabama, where offshore drilling is more intense than anything we would likely see off Florida, have come nowhere near what drilling proponents "project" for Florida. Only Louisiana comes close, but its revenues include substantial onshore production.

So yes, the money would be welcome. But the reality is that even compared to Florida's recession-shrunk budget, realistic drilling revenue is a drop in the bucket.

Meanwhile, the environmental impact of offshore drilling is much more than just the threat of an oil spill or gas well blowout, or leaks from the extensive series of undersea pipelines needed to move oil and gas to shore.

Rigs present a host of impacts, whether from drilling muds and other byproducts discharged from rigs, air pollution from large generators on rigs and from ships that service the rigs, to the effect on the seabed from the construction of rigs and the extensive pipeline systems.

But oil spills remain a serious threat.

Drilling proponents say it is safer than ever, with new technology. No doubt that's true — and yet, this year, one of the world's most modern rigs gushed up to 400 barrels of oil a day into the ocean near Australia for 10 long weeks before the leak could be sealed.

It's just not worth it.
