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Environmental News from Florida's capital by Bruce Ritchie

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It's not the risk from oil drilling, it's the pipelines, DEP says

In what the House council chairman said will be the first of several meetings on oil drilling, Florida's environmental chief today said drilling accidents pose a low risk to the state but he said other competing uses for state waters must be considered.



The House Select Council on Strategic and Economic Planning heard more than 4-1/2 hours of testimony on oil drilling as the Legislature is expected to take up the issue again next year. The House in May adopted a bill to lift Florida's ban on drilling in state waters but the Senate refused to take up the measure late in the session.

Some business groups today lined up in support of drilling, which they said would boost the economy and state revenues. Environmental groups and some coastal communities warned that drilling could ruin the state's tourism economy.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole, weighing in for the first time publicly on the issue, said the risk of a spill from drilling "is admittedly very low."

"I will tell you the data does show the higher risk issue is transportation," he said. "It's not the drilling so much but it's the pipelines, it's the barges -- these things present the higher risk for potential spills."

He said the state also needs to contemplate the physical damage that can occur if drilling and production are not conducted properly. And while showing a map of a network of oil and gas production lines offshore from Louisiana, he said competing use of state waters will be a concern in the future.

"When I say competing uses, I mean competing uses for beach

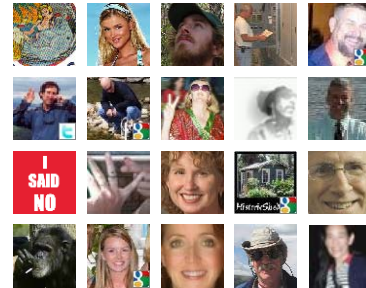
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restoration sand, competing uses for transportation corridors for our shipping lanes, competing uses for our aquaculture industry, which is now further and further looking at our offshore aquaculture potential."

Military training in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, Sole said, is "essential for maintaining protection of our great nation." And he added there are significant considerations for using offshore waters for alternative energy, such as windmills and wave action."

"Finally we also have important fisheries," Sole said. "Florida is the number one fishing destination in the world as far as I'm concerned. We need to be acknowledging that."

Sole also said that Texas earns \$46.5 million a year in oil royalties in state waters while Alabama's annual collection for royalties and severance has ranged from \$50 million to \$300 million from state waters.

Outside the Capitol hearing room, Sole told reporters, "We're keeping an open mind. But the same time we want to share the concerns" with representatives.

While an Associated Industries of Florida spokesman said the state can grow from a new "energy economy" from drilling that is compatible with beach tourism, an Audubon of Florida representative said that revenue estimates by supporters were speculative while the state was years away from adopting rules to allow drilling.

Republican House members who supported the drilling bill last spring grilled opponents during the hearing.

Rep. Jennifer Carroll, R-Fleming Island, chided Audubon's Eric Draper about discussing the state's revenue estimates from oil production -- even though Draper was responding to supporters who have estimated the state already is missing out on billions annually.

"All these dollar figures are just speculation right now," Carroll said, "until we do the exploration, until we do the drilling, until the product comes out of the ground and we know what the quality of the product is going to be."

Rep. Doug Holder, R-Sarasota, asked Council Chairman Dean Cannon how representatives could know which presentations are factual and which are not.

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About Me



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representative democracy 200 years ago," said Cannon, R-Winter Park, noting that House staff was gathering background information and sorting through the presentations.

"This is not the last but the first in a series of meetings we will have," Cannon said.

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Posted by Bruce Ritchie at **4:14 PM**



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