

This is a printer friendly version of an article from floridacapitalnews.com
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

Article published Nov 24, 2009

DRILLING

Lawmakers are wary of oily beaches

By Bill Cotterell

Florida Capital Bureau

State Rep. Leonard Bembry was hauling mobile homes to the area hit by Hurricane Katrina when he took a walk on the beach near Gulfport, Miss.

"I was looking at the debris on the beach, the shells and sand, and there was a film of oil on everything," the Greenville Democrat recalled last week. "This is not something that I heard about, not something I read about, this is something I saw."

And it's something he and other Big Bend legislators don't want to see on Florida's beaches. Even if offshore oil drilling produces thousands of jobs, promises energy independence and generates hundreds of millions in new tax revenue for the state, it will be hard for most area lawmakers to accept.

"Our seafood industry and our tourist industry, all the things that make Florida a great place to live, would be at risk," said Bembry, D-Greenville, whose district sprawls 321 miles along the coast from Apalachicola past the mouth of the Suwannee River. "If they were out there 25 or 30 miles, I'd probably be on the other side of the issue. Hey, we need to get energy-independent, but we don't need to drill 3 miles offshore."

State Rep. Marti Coley, R-Marianna, whose district extends to the coasts of Okaloosa and Walton Counties, voted to let the governor and Cabinet authorize oil and gas exploration when the issue bubbled up in the final weeks of this year's legislative session. But now, concerns raised by the Air Force and Navy about training areas in the Gulf, have made her reconsider.

"The key issue in my district is that the military absolutely has to be protected," she said. "Talking with military leaders in Bay County and other areas, their concern makes me take a step back. I need to revisit where I am on this one."

Senate Minority Leader Al Lawson, D-Tallahassee, said a poll of voters in his 16-county district showed them "pretty much evenly split" on the issue.

"I am personally opposed to the offshore oil drilling because I think it's being driven by greed for money for the state budget," said Lawson.

State Sen. Charlie Dean, R-Inverness, said he has serious reservations but has become more amenable to exploration because of economic and energy considerations. If the environment can be protected and oil companies don't ship everything to existing refineries in other states, Dean said, "we could look at the possibility" of allowing some wells.

"A few years ago, I'd have told you so quick, 'Hell no,' " said Dean. "But the Red Chinese are going

to be drilling off our shore" near Cuba.

"If it's limited and based on science and engineering, I probably would acquiesce, if — IF — whatever we take is then returned to the state of Florida, not the states of Alabama, Louisiana and Texas," said Dean.

Rep. Michelle Rehwinkel Vasilinda, D-Tallahassee, has come under fire by Democratic primary opponent Rick Minor for breaking with House Democrats to vote for the bill this year. But she said her focus is not oil but a wide range of renewable and alternative energy sources like wind, solar, wave and bio-fuel sources — along with raising energy efficiency standards.

"Renewables, efficiency and conservation all have to be part of our energy future," she said. "I know a nation that won a world war in four and a half years can do it."

Rep. Alan Williams, D-Tallahassee, said oil and gas exploration is "possible" in a few years but that he welcomed a Senate slowdown. Although the GOP House leadership remains enthusiastic, Williams said he's glad Senate President Jeff Atwater has called for studies.

"I voted against it because it came up so quickly last session. It was almost as if the folks in favor of offshore oil drilling tried to blind-side the Legislature," said Williams. "It was almost like "Star Wars," the way the Senate saved us at the end. Maybe they'll have to save us again."
