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Lawmakers kick off crucial round in state's drilling debate

in the state's offshore-drilling debate

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Oil drilling has been specifically banned in Florida coastal waters since 1990. Since 1947 only 19 wells have been drilled off the state's coast, with only one test well, in the Florida Keys, producing 15 barrels of oil.

But drilling advocates sense change is in the air. On Wednesday, a House committee opened debate on whether to allow oil drilling just a few miles off Florida's beachfront.

The debate, which already features a small army of lobbyists and hundreds of thousands of dollars in campaign contributions, will not culminate until early next May, when lawmakers conclude their annual session and will have decided the fate of the drill bill.

Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, chairman of the Select Policy Council on Strategic and Economic Planning, said the hearing was the first in a series on the issue, with more scheduled to review the economic, environmental and financial impact of the proposal.

Cannon promised a "methodical and thoughtful" examination of the issue. He said lawmakers would listen to experts and citizens "from all sides of the issue and remain focused on helping restart Florida's economy while protecting our state's environmental treasures and our important tourism economy."



COURTESY PHOTO

The Florida House passed a bill this year allowing oil rigs as close as three miles to shore, but it wasn't taken up by the Senate.

Earlier this year, the House passed an oil-drilling bill, which was supported by Cannon, that would have allowed rigs as close as three miles to Florida's shores. But the legislation was never taken up by the Senate.

In Wednesday's hearing, council members heard familiar arguments about allowing drilling in state waters, which stretch to a little more than 10 miles off shore in the Gulf of Mexico, the most likely area for oil drilling and exploration.

Proponents, including business groups and oil companies, say technology has improved to the point where oil spills remain unlikely and that the potential oil and natural gas off Florida's coast could boost the state's budget and economy, while helping improve the country's energy independence.

Opponents, including environmental groups and some beachfront businesses and community leaders, said the drilling has the potential to severely damage the state's ecology and tourism industry if a major oil spill occurs. They questioned whether the drilling would bring substantial money to the state or have any real impact on the country's overall energy production.

Oil drilling has been specifically banned in Florida coastal waters since 1990. Since 1947 only 19 wells have been drilled off the state's coast, with only one test well, in the Florida Keys, producing 15 barrels of oil, said Mike Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

Sole said there is lack of hard data on what may be available in the state waters as well as the much larger portion of the eastern Gulf that is under federal jurisdiction and has been under a separate moratorium. But he said preliminary information indicates that there could be natural gas deposits near Pensacola and deposits of a heavy grade of oil off the Southwest Florida coast related to the Sunniland oil fields in the Big Cypress Swamp.

A key issue in the debate will be whether a reversal in state policy allowing oil drilling could boost the state's economy and provide additional revenue to a state budget that could be facing a deficit of \$2.6 billion or more in the next year.

Rep. Seth McKeel, R-Lakeland, said he believes the drilling proposal could bring "high-paying" jobs to the state as well as provide more money for the state budget.

Sole told the council that Alabama brings in up to \$300 million a year from the extraction of natural gas from its coastal waters.

But opponents dispute the jobs and revenue claims, arguing that proponents are exaggerating the potential benefits. One pro-drilling study suggested the state could reap as much as \$2 billion a year.

"The math doesn't add up," said Eric Draper, a lobbyist for Audubon of Florida, an

environmental group opposed to drilling.

Additionally, Draper and the other opponents said even if the drilling brings more jobs and extra state revenue, it potentially could threaten the state's \$65 billion-a-year beach tourism industry if a major spill occurs.

"We don't think oil drilling is going to generate the economic benefits that are going to offset the very, very important coastal tourism benefit," Draper said.

Sole, the state's top environmental regulator, told the council that the chances of an oil spill related to drilling "is low." He said spills are more likely to occur in the transportation of the product through shipping or pipelines.

While proponents note the U.S. has not had a major oil spill related to drilling since 1969, opponents cited the on-going spill off the Australian coast that has spewed thousands of gallons of crude oil into the Timor Sea because of a damaged oil rig.

Environmental groups and other opponents also cited the 1993 oil spill in Tampa Bay that dumped nearly 400,000 gallons of oil and fuel into the water after a freighter collided with two barges.

Proponents noted that the oil spill was the result of a transportation accident and not drilling, adding that drilling in Florida could reduce the need to import as much oil.

Council members also heard from beachfront communities opposed to the drilling plan.

Robin Grabowski, head of the Tampa Bay Beaches Chamber of Commerce, said hotels in her area suffered a significant business decline following the 1993 oil spill.

She said the beachfront communities that she represents see the drilling as a potential threat to their livelihood.

"We have world-class beaches from Destin southward," Grabowski said. "If you sell our shore for oil, we start to have the potential for a loss."

But Jose Gonzalez, a lobbyist for Associated Industries of Florida, said the business group's annual polling shows a strong majority of Floridians support oil drilling, while conceding that the drilling was not likely to have much of an impact on gas prices.

"Florida need jobs. The state needs any revenue that we can get," Gonzalez said. "For us it's never been about gas prices. It's about jobs and access to our natural resources."

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