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TOP STORY

Offshore drilling splits House

Polls show growing support as opponents warn of environmental fallout

By Bill Cotterell

Florida Capital Bureau

During the Florida Legislature's first big hearing on offshore oil drilling, state Rep. Paige Kreegel summed up the collision of economic, environmental and political factors.

"They say it will take years to produce anything," the Punta Gorda Republican said last week. "But if we were sitting here in 1960, couldn't they say that about the Apollo project to put a man on the moon?"

Statewide public discussion of Gulf coast oil exploration starts with a public forum broadcast from Florida State University from 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday. An evenly split panel of six experts will take questions from a studio audience and viewers watching on television and the Internet.

Florida's territorial control extends 10.36 miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Although 124 leases have been issued and 19 wells were punched into the seabed, the term "offshore oil drilling" has, in the past, ranked somewhere between "state income tax" and "anti-death penalty" among the state's political taboos.

Changing sentiment?

Opponents speak of tar balls washing ashore, hurricanes uprooting even submerged oil pumps and a change of Florida's image from the nation's playground to its utility room. Proponents promise jobs, hundreds of millions in sorely needed tax revenue and an environmentally safe contribution to energy independence.

Public support for some forms of drilling has risen in polls by Associated Industries of Florida since 2006. Last year, aligning with GOP presidential nominee John McCain, Gov. Charlie Crist switched — saying he could support considering drilling that's "far enough, safe enough and clean enough" — and the state House passed a bill that would have allowed the state's Cabinet to grant drilling permits.

The idea sank without a ripple in the Senate but AIF is making a major push in the 2010 session to get exploration started. The lure: up to an estimated 20,000 new jobs, with an equal number produced in support industries once production starts.

Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, citing 15-percent unemployment in Collier County parts of his district, said the state has to get started on a frank assessment of how much oil and natural gas is out there and how safely it can be pumped up. Hudson's district runs across the Everglades to Broward County and he said some inland wells prove it can be done.

"I'm the only guy in the state of Florida with active drilling now in his district," he said. "We've been

doing it responsibly for 66 years in the middle of the Everglades and if you can drill in the most sensitive lands on the planet responsibly, for the balance of the environment, then we can do it anywhere."

'Not just ... beaches'

But Eric Draper of the Audubon Society, one of the panelists at Wednesday's forum, said drilling will jeopardize Florida's beaches. He said it won't produce the promised jobs and won't lower prices at the pump.

"Many people make the assertion that the production of oil here in Florida will somehow affect gas prices. It will not," he said. "Gas prices are affected by international supply and demand. The amount we could produce in oil won't affect that."

David McLain of Eastpoint, policy director for Apalachicola Riverkeeper, said much is at stake.

"We're not just talking about beaches," he said. "We're talking about the entire coastline of Florida. We're talking about the impact of it inboard, as well as along the beachline."

Leadership listens

In addition to the panelists, state Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Melbourne, and Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Winter Park, will attend the forum. They will become presiding officers of the House and Senate next year, and Cannon got his special House council on strategic planning to work on the drilling issue last week.

Cannon said that "20 years ago, the Legislature made a reasonable and, I believe, correct decision" to ban drilling in Florida waters. But now, with the state facing revenue shortfalls projected as high as \$2 billion, and technology possibly making exploration safer, Cannon said it's time to take another look.
