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Oil drilling debate conjures images of utopia, disaster

By Josh Hafenbrack

Tallahassee Bureau

TALLAHASSEE

Envision oil derricks cluttering Florida's sunset views. Oil spills threatening marine life, turning beach sand black and scaring away tourists.

Or picture a very different scenario: High-tech oil and gas operations that set a new safety standard. Thousands of high-paying jobs flooding Florida. Billions in state revenues.

Those competing scenarios emerged Wednesday during a two-hour televised debate between offshore oil drilling supporters and foes in Florida, sponsored by the Tallahassee Democrat and Florida State University. The forum featured dueling three-member panels -- for and against drilling -- as well as two legislative leaders.

The debate hints at a grueling political battle on the horizon in Tallahassee: Whether to repeal the 1990 ban on oil drilling in Florida waters, which extends 10.3 miles from the coast in the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Drilling in the oil- and natural gas-rich Gulf could become the top issue during Gov. Charlie Crist's final year in office and the Legislature's spring session, which begins in March.

Hank Fishkind, an Orlando economist who favors drilling, said opening Florida waters to exploration would create 20,000 jobs and bring in more than \$2 billion to the state. At the same time, he said, the risk of an oil spill is slight.

Another drilling supporter, Southern Strategy Group adviser David Rancourt, compared drilling to putting a man on the moon. Using modern technology, Florida could drill and maintain a strong tourism industry, he said, adding: "Oil and gas exploration and beautiful beaches are not mutually exclusive."

But drilling foes say if Florida lifts its drilling ban, the state would risk its tourism-based economy and environment on an unproven promise of jobs and money. And drilling off Florida's coast won't drive down gas prices or do much toward making American energy independent, they said.

"Near shore oil drilling will put at risk our environment, our economy, and will change Florida as we know it forever," said Pinellas County Commissioner Kenneth Welch. "Florida's coastal environment is not for sale. Why would we risk a world-class tourism economy?" In Tallahassee last spring, an effort to repeal Florida's oil-drilling ban passed in the House, but stalled in the Senate.

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At Wednesday's forum were Rep. Dean Cannon, R- Winter Park, and Sen. Mike Haridopolos, R-Indiatlantic. Both lawmakers support oil drilling -- at one point Wednesday, Haridopolos decried the "scare tactics" of drilling opponents -- but said they want to gather facts and lead a thorough review before voting.

The debate moderator, Gannett Capitol Bureau Chief Paul Flemming, pressed the pro-drilling panelists over the shadowy finances of the group lobbying for the drill-now effort. Rancourt would only say that the group includes a "God fearing" collection of American oil and gas explorers. "Some of them wish to remain anonymous for the time being," he said, citing competitive concerns.

That didn't cut it for Florida Audubon's Eric Draper, who noted the public owns the waters that petroleum interests want to explore. "We don't get at the truth when we're hiding behind the claim of anonymity," Draper said.

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