

Julie Hauserman: oil-drilling benefits for Florida sound good, but take a closer look

By Julie Hauserman Guest columnist

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These days, I want to believe anybody who talks about bringing Florida some jobs. Lord knows, we need jobs.

But it is wishful thinking to believe the dubious promises from Florida Energy Associates, a shadowy group that wants to drill off our beaches. They won't tell which oil companies they represent. But they are hiring, all right: so far, they've put 30 lobbyists and a small army of public relations spinners on their payroll. Let's call them Slick Oil.

Dealing with these mystery people is like hiring a wedding planner before you even meet your blind date.

We have no idea whether they are capable of providing jobs for Floridians or if they will import workers instead. We don't know if they are foreign governments or American companies. We don't know if they are financially stable.

Let's take a commonsense look at their wild economic claims:

Jobs: The Slick Oil lobbyists distributed a handout at the Capitol claiming they will provide 20,000 direct jobs. Who knows? There's no way to check that. But let's compare it to something we know for sure: Florida's tourism industry — which depends on clean beaches that aren't covered with ugly industrial construction and sticky tar balls — provides a million jobs, 50 times more than Slick Oil is promising.

The driller lobbyists are talking about blue-collar jobs, and admit they will import higher-paid managers and specialists from elsewhere. These oil jobs are years away, and they aren't stable. Florida's largest oil producer is the Jay Field in Santa Rosa County. The 70 workers there were out of a job most of this year after the owner, Colorado's Quantum Resources, shut down in January, citing low oil prices.

State Revenue: Driller lobbyists are promising something that doesn't exist — a stable economy based on oil drilling. The \$2 billion-a-year annual state revenue they promise in their handouts depends on unknown petroleum reserves (companies have been drilling dry holes off Florida for 50 years), volatile world markets and unpredictable

world politics.

How much money Florida might make or lose from drilling is anyone's guess. Some Tallahassee politicians are scrambling to accommodate Slick Oil. So far, the oil lobbyists have dropped at least a quarter-million in campaign cash to lubricate the discussion. (And that's just the money they report.)

History shows us that other "pots of gold" at the Florida Legislature haven't been used as promised. Florida Lottery money was supposed boost education funding, but politicians played a shell game with it. Legislators borrowed from the Lawton Chiles' tobacco settlement trust fund — money that was earmarked for children's health care — and they still haven't paid it back.

This debate comes down to one choice: trading existing, clean industry jobs our \$562 billion-a-year coastal economy — for dirty jobs that may not materialize. Somebody might get rich off this scheme, and I'm going to bet it won't be Florida taxpayers.

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