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Sue Gross: Promise of drilling jobs is an empty one

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While offshore-drilling enthusiasts tour the state promising thousands of new jobs for Florida (20,000 rig jobs and 231,000 jobs overall), we are being bombarded by TV and print ads from "The people of America's Oil and Natural Gas Industry," which sounds so much friendlier than the American Petroleum Institute — which it actually is — made up of 400 "corporate members" of the oil industry.

In a double-page spread in *Newsweek*, featuring an offshore rig glowing in a sunset beside beaming shirt-sleeved workers, the copy reads "...natural gas jobs alone have shot up 20 percent since 2006." With unemployment soaring in the Sunshine State, sunny promises are highly seductive — and utterly preposterous.

Oil and gas extraction is a volatile industry that recently plunged into its third major downturn since the late 1990s. As a result, nearly one in every six Texans employed by the oil and gas industry, or 37,500 workers, lost their jobs. Texas communities that had based their economies on the boom and bust oil and gas markets were hurting.

A sobering prediction for Florida to consider: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that employment in the oil and gas extraction industry will decline in less than a decade. And its statistics contradict the oil lobby's job creation estimates for Florida. In 2008, the total number of "extraction workers," the people directly employed on rigs, was only 20,900. Oil proponents would have us believe that drilling off our coast will magically double the total number of rig jobs in the entire United States?

Besides, those plum rig jobs might not even go to Americans. U.S. maritime law requires that all seagoing vessels, including oil rigs, operating on the outer continental shelf employ only U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. But a foreign-flagged vessel is exempt if it is more than 50-percent foreign-owned, and fewer than half the rigs actively drilling in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico last November were flying American flags.

Business Week reported on a recent lawsuit filed in a

Texas federal court. American rig workers have accused U.S. energy services companies operating in the Gulf of Mexico of "using workers recruited from Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines, and other countries to displace U.S. workers, at less than half of the pay." Both onshore and offshore non-U.S. workers can be found doing shipbuilding, pipe-fitting, welding, rigging pipe-laying, cable-laying, diving support work, heavy-lift crane construction and installation. In other words, all those great jobs promised by drilling proponents.

The Texas oil workers' lawsuit has so far employed 48 attorneys who have skillfully tied up the court for five years with 509 motions. So yes, we can probably count on drilling bringing more jobs to Florida — for lawyers, anyway. After years of bowing to oil interests and suffering the ecological consequences, Louisiana has finally gotten tough, according to Mark Davis, Senior Research Fellow at Tulane University at the February FSU Oil Symposium. A suit was filed recently against drilling rig manufacturer and operator Rowan Companies, accused of discharging garbage and pollutants in violation of both the Clean Water Act and the Louisiana Water Control Law. Rowan's senior vice president was the genial, silver-haired gentleman at the November FSU Oil Symposium, who assured a skeptical audience how hard the industry was working to protect the environment.

With close to a million people directly employed in Florida's \$57 billion tourist industry, there is no question that tourism jobs, dependent on the reputation of our white beaches, would vanish in the event of an oil spill. "Not one drop of oil was

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spilled in the recent hurricanes" is the oft-quoted mantra of drilling proponents, contradicting U.S. Minerals Management Service reports that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita alone spewed 741,000 gallons, and destroyed 115 petroleum production platforms and 457 pipelines.

How did workers in the unofficial oil capital of the U.S. fare in the recent downturn? Houston unemployment figures nearly doubled in two years. "For the third consecutive month, companies that provide support activities for oil and gas exploration and production have been eliminating positions," the *Houston Chronicle* reported last August.

"The biggest problem facing Houston today revolves around the energy industry," reported *Forbes*. "Lower energy prices, along with the global slowdown, have taken a dent in job growth. ... Over the coming years, the production downturn could devastate places like western Texas, the Dakotas, Louisiana, California's Kern County and anywhere else that produces American crude and gas."

Including Florida.

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