



Shoring up support in offshore debate

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TALLAHASSEE — The push for the Florida Legislature to approve near-shore Gulf Coast drilling in its 2010 session is like oil exploration itself — surveys and projections, expert opinions, test wells to take the political pulse and throwing around plenty of money in search of a gusher that ends in a positive vote.

As things stand now, it's likely proponents will hit a dry hole, at least in the immediate future. But, as with wildcatting, a surprise strike is always possible. The House earlier this year voted 70-43, almost precisely on party lines, to explore drilling in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Senate President Jeff Atwater then refused to take up the matter.

Four months out from the start of next spring's regular legislative session, it appears drilling legislation would still pass in the House. And Atwater still appears unlikely to move the legislation through the Senate. In 2011, the situation could be different because two main proponents will lead the House and Senate.

In the 2008 presidential campaign, Gov. Charlie Crist startled environmentalists who had supported him by echoing Sen. John McCain's "drill here, drill now" call, but he's backtracked as a U.S. Senate candidate.

His mantra now is that oil and gas exploration must be "clean enough, safe enough and far enough" offshore not to interfere with the state's tourism economy.

Atwater, a Palm Beach County Republican running for chief financial officer, threw cold water on drilling talks at the beginning of November, directing Senate staff to work with several state and academic organizations to address more than a dozen issues related to drilling.

Atwater pointedly added that "this analysis will be driven by the need for a dispassionate review, not timelines or schedules."

Associated Industries of Florida, the state's largest and most influential business lobbying force, is solidly behind the push for drilling.

AIF President Barney Bishop cites polling data that shows two-thirds public support for drilling when couched in the most favorable light. He said he thinks the plan will pass next year.

But Eric Draper, a lobbyist for Audubon of Florida said he doesn't think there are enough votes in the Senate. And he added that Atwater "set the bar high" for proponents to prove their economic and environmental claims.

"The trend line is moving in our direction," he said.

Both Draper and Bishop took encouragement from Crist's "far enough, clean enough and safe enough" position.

Draper said those criteria could never be met, while Bishop said senators can be mollified that future governors and Cabinet officers will impose "the toughest environmental standards in the world" on coastal exploration.

Sen. David Aronberg, a Broward County Democrat, has sponsored a plan for a year-long study commission to dig for fiscal and ecological facts. He said the drilling bill will zip through the House.

"But I would put its changes, at best, at 50-50 in the Senate," he said.

Sen. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, said business interests and oil companies are capitalizing on Florida's revenue woes and public concern for jobs to do what could never be done before.

"I believe the oil guys are going to talk about school funding and revenue shortfalls and make this some panacea," he said. "This is the pretend solution du jour. Sometimes it's gambling. Sometimes it's borrowing. This year, it's oil drilling."