



Guest Column: Don't miss chance to drill and boost economy

By Barney T. Bishop III

Sunday, July 12, 2009

As Sen. Bill Nelson toured Florida in June threatening his filibuster to stop a federal energy bill, he regrettably demagogued on the "evils" of domestic oil and gas exploration off Florida's coasts and predicted the demise of our state's tourism industry and military bases should this occur. Scare tactics and outrageous claims will not fix our nation's energy crisis. Sen. Nelson's unwavering resistance to domestic exploration of oil and natural gas is stubborn and incongruent with the majority of Floridians who support it.

Our national security is of the utmost importance, and military testing operations in the Gulf will take precedence over other activities. However, there is no need to make it mutually exclusive of efforts to increase domestic fuel supplies. Through collaboration and coordination, the two can work hand-in-hand and work well. As one of the largest consumers of petroleum products, it is in the U.S. military's best interest to have increased access to domestic supplies of oil.

Sen. Nelson's emotional rhetoric on the devastation that oil exploration would have on our state only hurts Florida's economy. By blocking this bill and not focusing on the need for revenue sharing, Florida will once again miss out on the millions of dollars other Gulf States receive from revenue sharing agreements.

Claims that revenue from energy production could not be spent on other state-supported programs, such as education and environmental protection, are misleading. In fact, the federal interpretation of revenue sharing is very broad, and other issues *can* be funded by revenue generated through oil exploration off our coasts. Instead of condemning the funds that could be created, Sen. Nelson should work to expand revenue-sharing possibilities. Even if federal funds could be used only in selected areas of our state budget, it would undoubtedly free up money in Florida's coffers to be redirected to other areas, including education, infrastructure and health and human services.

We need oil and natural gas to maintain our way of life, and natural gas production is already under way today in the Gulf of Mexico south of the Florida Panhandle. Sen. Nelson should listen to his constituents rather than throwing himself in the way of progress.

There is great opportunity here in Florida — for our state and our nation. Let's not be swayed by Sen. Nelson's tired old tune. Let's not squander a chance to boost our state's economy and move our nation toward energy independence.