



Time For Oil Drilling Off Florida

By BARNEY BISHOP
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Presidential campaigning has placed the media spotlight on the offshore drilling discussion. While I am glad for the renewed attention to this important topic, I worry politics will divide what is a really a nonpartisan issue. The public overwhelmingly supports increased exploration for oil and natural gas off Florida's coastline. As Floridians and Americans, we cannot afford to sit back as our energy future and the future of our natural resources are debated in the political arena. It's time to stop talking and start taking action.

Results from a 2005 Associated Industries of Florida (AIF) poll revealed 59 percent of Floridians were supportive of increased exploration for and production of natural gas and oil in the eastern Gulf of Mexico (GOM). Fast forward two and a half years and \$4-a-gallon gas later, and, not surprisingly, we have seen that level of support rising. AIF has done periodic polling, and every summer when the price of gasoline goes up, the number of Floridians willing to allow drilling increases. Last week, AIF released results from our latest poll, which indicated two of every three Floridians want to look closer to our shorelines for natural energy resources - anywhere from their own backyard to at least 50 miles off shore.

Those of us who support the search for natural energy resources in the eastern gulf never claim it will lower prices at the gas pump because we know it will not. Rather it is our opponents who are trying to sell the public an unrealistic, "feel-good" vision of the future that focuses solely on alternative-energy sources. We must continue to invest in alternative energy, but tapping into existing natural energy resources has to be part of the equation. Alternative energies are a long way off. For at least the next 20 years, we will have to rely on fossil fuel because it is the best, most cost-effective way to deliver energy to a country that thrives on it.

Naysayers maintain the search for oil and natural gas in the gulf will spoil our beaches and contribute to a decline in tourism. I would argue that so long as tourists can't see an oil rig, tourism will continue unaffected. If one stands on the beach and looks to the horizon, you can see about eight to 12 miles on a clear day. Nothing in sight - no problem for beach-goers.

Drilling alone is not a panacea. If we further our search for Florida and American-based oil and natural gas resources while maintaining a commitment to alternative energy, nuclear power and conservation, we may be able to work ourselves out of our current energy quandary. In December 2005, when AIF endorsed more exploration of oil and natural gas in the eastern GOM, we also endorsed energy conservation, all forms of alternative energy, nuclear energy, and, of

course, the continued use of fossil fuel because it is the only thing we have right now in abundance.

AIF and our members appreciate the willingness to revisit this issue and the opportunity for individual states to determine what works best for that state. A renewable future requires something more tangible than the promise of a better tomorrow. That future isn't going to be cheaper, it isn't going to be dependable, and it isn't going to be readily available if we don't commit to it today.

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