

## Caveat emptor on drilling

**The gist: Wondrous claims about lifting Florida's offshore ban don't hold water.**

October 29, 2009 Fortunately for Florida, Rep. Dean Cannon's quest to lift the state's offshore drilling ban is slowing. Credit the growing number of dubious claims for dragging it down.

The latest came last week during a hearing before the House Select Policy Council on Strategic & Economic Planning, when promises about the riches drilling would produce for Florida landed with a thud.

The pro-drilling group Florida Energy Associates estimates Florida can expect \$2.25 billion in royalties annually by opening up its coastal waters in the Gulf to drilling. That's based in part on the assumption that it can depend on companies pumping 150 million barrels of oil annually.

Well ... Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Michael Sole told the council chaired by Mr. Cannon that Louisiana produces just 6 million barrels of oil annually. And Texas — big ol' *Texas* — produces just 2 million barrels annually from its state waters. Add in its take from natural gas, and it nets an average of about \$45 million a year.

The Texas General Land Office adds that *all* offshore drilling up to 10 miles off the Lone Star State's shores since the late 1940s has brought Texans just over \$6 billion in royalties.

But Florida, somehow, can expect \$2.25 billion a year?

Or maybe those wanting to drill really don't know what to expect? As a representative for Big Oil says, "we are confident there are significant reserves off Florida's coast." But he adds, "like the environmentalists [say], you won't know for sure how much is out there unless you drill and find out."

Other claims are faring little better. Or worse. Like the one that says criticism concerning the damage drilling can cause amounts to fear-mongering, because modern oil exploration's improved safety record ensures it will protect and preserve Florida's coastline.

Except 150 miles off Australia's northwest coast, for a 10th straight week, oil continues to spew up to 400 barrels a day from a state-of-the-art rig.

Four attempts to seal the leak by some of the world's leading oil well-control specialists have failed. A fifth try is scheduled next weekend.

Big Oil's defenders say a spill — however unlikely — off Florida's shallower waters could be sealed far more speedily.

But, quite likely, not before damaging the coast. Moreover, lifting Florida's drilling ban would likely cause the federal ban that keeps drilling 125 miles from the Gulf shore to crumble. A spill in a deep-set rig 50 or 75 miles out could present Florida with a hard-to-cap crisis like the one near Australia.

Claims by Mr. Cannon that offshore drilling will get an honest and open airing also took a hit earlier this month when the Senate leadership appointed the spouse of a lobbyist for the oil industry to head a committee that will consider a drilling bill.

Mr. Cannon also keeps talking about how all those drilling royalties can support all sorts of needy state programs, including those benefiting the environment.

But where's the discussion about how much money the state would have to devote to regulating drilling?

According to a report in Wednesday's *Sentinel*, Mr. Cannon now thinks he won't be able get the Legislature to vote this year on lifting Florida's drilling ban.

He's looking instead to next year's regular session.

That's a relief. This idea needs a lot more time and review, and even then it may not pass muster.

Without further scrutiny, its credibility will keep springing leaks each time it surfaces.

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