

# DRILLING OFF FLORIDA: A CLOSER LOOK AT THE RISKS



1993 Pinellas County Beach

NOAA Restoration Center

Florida's coastline is an essential component of the state's identity and wellbeing. With 8,500 miles of tidally influenced coastline and 825 miles of sandy beaches, much of Florida's economy is dependent upon its coastal environment. This environment, however, is facing enormous threats from proposed legislation that would allow offshore drilling within three miles of the coast.

Florida's coastline and coastal communities form a mosaic of natural and human communities, joined in their dependence on clean, healthy, and vibrant coastal waters that sustain wildlife, recreation, tourism, fishing, and human health. From the vast coastal marshes and seagrass beds of the Nature Coast to the fishing destinations like Destin, San Carlos, and the Florida Keys, a healthy ocean is essential to the Florida economy and state we know and love. Florida's coastal ecosystems, economies, and military training areas would all be threatened by expanded offshore drilling activities along Florida's coast. The risk of routine pollution or a catastrophic spill is too great to justify any new exploration, leasing, or drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico or along Florida's east coast.

## **Offshore Drilling Operations Would Harm Florida's Valuable Coast**

Offshore drilling poses serious risks to our beaches, coastlines and fisheries, from oil spills to onshore industrialization. Oil spills will be an inevitable result of offshore drilling. For example, over half a million gallons of oil spilled from platforms, rigs, tanks and pipelines in the Gulf of Mexico during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.<sup>1</sup>

When spilled oil weathers on the water's surface, it turns into tar balls, ranging in size from a dime to a dinner plate. Tar balls stick to beachgoer's feet and also settle in seaweed drifts, threatening sea turtles and birds. One study found that over 34 percent of post-hatchling sea turtles captured and examined in the Atlantic Ocean off Florida contained tar in their stomachs and esophagi, and over half of the turtles had tar caked in their jaws.<sup>2</sup> Floridians have already paid oil companies \$127.5-million tax dollars since 2002 to buy back their previous offshore leases to keep our beaches free from the nasty tar balls that routinely foul Texas and Louisiana shores.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to oil spills, oil and gas drilling also produces massive amounts of waste muds and cuttings - the material that is dug up and removed while drilling a well and the substance used to lubricate drill bits and maintain pressure while drilling. Each well can generate tens of thousands of gallons of these muds and cuttings, enough waste to fill several backyard swimming pools.<sup>4</sup> This waste can contain toxic metals, including mercury, lead, and cadmium.<sup>5</sup> Even if these muds and cuttings are captured and returned to shore, they still pose a disposal problem.

Drilling rigs also produce hundreds of thousands of gallons of polluted "produced water" daily, and it can contain benzene,

arsenic, lead, naphthalene, zinc, and toluene.<sup>6</sup>

Oil drillers say they plan to build pipelines to carry the oil or gas from Florida to refineries in nearby Gulf coast states. These pipelines would either bring the oil or gas onto our coast and then overland to Alabama or Louisiana, or drillers would build a new pipeline to hook up with the existing pipelines now off Louisiana and Alabama.<sup>7</sup> According to an American Petroleum Institute spokesperson, pipelines were the source of most of the oil that spilled from U.S. offshore drilling every year between 1998 and 2007.<sup>8</sup>

Oil industry brochures pushed by Tallahassee lobbyists tout new technologies that will allow drilling to take place underwater and out of view. A recent investigation revealed that such subsea drilling installations are used almost exclusively in depths greater than 5,000 feet. Florida waters run no deeper than 100 feet. It concluded that drilling of Florida's coast would likely be done with traditional rigs rising hundreds of feet above the water.<sup>9</sup>

## Currents Would Carry Gulf Oil Spill to Keys, Atlantic Beaches



Offshore drilling.

(image: sun-sentinel.com)

A large swath of both of the state's shorelines would be at risk from an oil spill if drilling rigs operated within 125 miles of Florida. This is due to the Gulf of Mexico's Loop Current, which circulates warm water from the Caribbean Sea toward Louisiana, then sweeps it down through the Straits of Florida, around the Keys and along the Atlantic coast.

An oil spill in the eastern Gulf of Mexico that settles into the Loop Current could flow south and coat the Southwest coast and the Florida Keys, affecting prime fishing and marine nursery grounds, then fouling the state's Atlantic beaches, coral reefs, and estuaries.<sup>10</sup>

Most of Florida's residents live along the coast, so if a spill were to occur, large numbers of people would be affected

where they live, work, go to school, and recreate. Fifteen of the state's 20 major population centers are located in coastal counties surrounding a bay, estuary or river mouth.<sup>11</sup>

## Increased Offshore Drilling in the Gulf Won't Ensure Lower Fuel Prices for Florida

There is no evidence that drilling would beneficially influence the price of gas at the pump. In fact, according to the Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration, the impact of drilling in areas previously closed to oil and gas drilling on average wellhead prices is expected to be "insignificant."<sup>12</sup> And, there is no guarantee that any of the oil or gas would be sold in Florida.



Green Sea Turtle

Photo David Ho

## Drilling Threatens Florida's Ocean and Coastal Economies

The number of jobs oil drillers are promising is miniscule compared to the jobs produced by the state's tourism industry, which depends on clean water, clean beaches, and abundant fish and wildlife. Florida tourism generates a million jobs,<sup>13</sup> fifty times more than the 20,000 jobs<sup>14</sup> drillers are promising.

Florida's tourism numbers show that, in 2008, visitors spent \$65.2 billion, and Florida collected \$3.9 billion, in total tourism sales tax revenues.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, any claim by the oil industry concerning the revenues a state-leasing program will create is speculative. For example, Texas only gets about \$45 million a year.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the imagined drilling revenues and the actual value of Florida's ocean and coastal economies is also striking. The state's coastal and ocean economies generated \$587 billion in 2006<sup>17</sup>, almost 300 times more than the driller's projected annual revenue. Florida has the nation's biggest recreational fishing industry. Combined, Florida's boating and fishing industries generate just over \$26 billion per year and provide about 305,000 jobs,<sup>18</sup> more than 15 times the number of jobs the drillers promise. It makes no economic sense to threaten these ocean and coastal economies with the pollution and industrialization that accompanies oil drilling and its onshore facilities.

## New Technologies Won't Prevent Spills or Hide Rigs from View

The drilling technology that the drillers say they would use off Florida's coast is at the center of a catastrophic oil spill in Australia's coastal waters.<sup>19</sup>

This "new and improved" technology apparently spewed at least 1 million gallons of oil into the ocean between August 21, 2009 and November 3, 2009.<sup>20</sup>

The spilled oil and condensate, combined with the dispersant used to try to control the slick, created a toxic cocktail that will have a long-term impact on the area's pristine tropical marine life.<sup>21</sup> They also claim that new drilling rig designs are safer, virtually eliminating the risk of spills.<sup>22</sup> Both claims are false.



Mangroves

Photo NOAA Restoration Center

## A Smarter Investment

Florida could save \$28 billion and create 14,000 jobs in the next 14 years by using energy efficiency strategies that are

available now. The direct and indirect jobs created would be equivalent to nearly 100 new manufacturing plants relocating to Florida, but without the demand for infrastructure and other energy needs.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, investments in comprehensive clean energy and climate policies could create between 47,000 and 78,000 jobs in Florida over the next 10 years.<sup>24</sup> Moving in that direction would create more clean jobs, spur new business, innovation and safeguard some of Florida's greatest assets - our coasts and oceans.



Chevron Genesis Oil Rig Platform Gulf of Mexico

(AP Photo/Mary Altatter, file)

## A Call To Action

A closer look at the facts proves hands-down that drilling is shortsighted, reckless, and simply not worth the economic or environmental risk. Please share this with other citizens and with elected representatives who may be studying the issue. And please visit [www.flcoastalandocean.org](http://www.flcoastalandocean.org) and [www.protectfloridasbeaches.org](http://www.protectfloridasbeaches.org) to learn more.

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- Contributors: Julie Hauserman, Ericka D'Avanzo, Lindsey Pickel, Sal Catania  
 Surfrider Foundation, Caribbean Conservation Corporation, Gulf Restoration Network, Environmental Defence Fund, Indian Riverkeeper, Reef Relief, NRDC.

