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## Gulf Drilling Can Help Florida's Environment

*By J. Robert McClure III*

Strident attacks on Governor Bush's sensible stance in favor of allowing limited oil drilling in remote portions of the Gulf are inadvertently emerging as one of the biggest threats to Florida's environment, not to mention its economy.

Here's why: The good things that Florida's state and local governments do depend on having enough money to fund them while also keeping tax rates low enough to preserve a business-friendly climate. This economic climate has allowed Florida to lead the nation in job creation.

Many of those good things include the obvious such as the building of schools and roads. They also include a host of environment-friendly programs such as restoring the Everglades, acquiring pristine lands for wilderness protection, and safeguarding the aquifers where most Floridians get their drinking water.

Much of the money comes from visitors, who create thousands of jobs. They also pay sales taxes, resort taxes, gasoline taxes, and – indirectly – some of the property taxes of the businesses they patronize.

One of the biggest current threats to Florida tourism isn't hurricanes or red tide; it's the potential impact on tourism of \$5-a-gallon gasoline and the spike in other energy costs. If families forgo vacation travel while businesses and other

organizations -- shocked by soaring air fares -- economize by canceling trips to popular convention sites such as Orlando or Miami Beach, the state's revenues could well face a double whammy. Moreover, as costs rise for fuel oil this winter, there will be fewer disposable dollars for consumers.

The key to avoiding this calamity is to improve the nation's energy *supply*. Sure, conservation can help on the demand side of the ledger, but there's nothing much the United States alone can do to quench the growing thirst for oil in newly booming economies such as China and India. Worldwide demand will continue to rise.

On the other hand, the United States could do a lot more to ensure itself an adequate supply of energy. Consider oil and natural gas. What danger to America is the greatest: Harm to Alaska's caribou? Damage near offshore oil rigs? Oil on Florida's beaches?

Actually, none of these is a serious threat, especially when compared to the economic malaise that could afflict Florida and the entire nation if America's energy supply dried up or became inordinately expensive.

Indeed, Alaska's caribou herds are larger today than they were in the 1970s. They'd be likely to do just as well in the adjoining Arctic National Wildlife Refuge if that 17-million-acre area were opened up to oil and gas development.

ANWR's estimated 10.4 *billion* barrels of oil could supply a million barrels a day for 30 years -- and production would be limited to a 2,000-acre pad. Proportionally, it's the rough equivalent of reserving eight seats at Miami's 72,000-seat Orange Bowl.

As for the Gulf, not only are companies producing oil more efficiently now than they were in the 1960s; they're doing it without damaging the environment. The Coast Guard reports that from 1980 to 1999, some 7.4 billion barrels of oil were produced in offshore waters. The spills -- less than 0.0001 percent of the oil produced -- were less than the amount of oil that naturally seeps up from the bottom of the Gulf.

America's dependence on foreign oil -- now at the 60-percent level and growing, with much of it coming from unstable areas -- represents a serious threat to U.S. energy security as well as Florida's economy.

The problem isn't that the United States lacks oil and gas reserves; it's that most of the more than 131 billion barrels of oil and 1,000 trillion cubic feet of natural gas is located in areas where production is either severely restricted or banned altogether.

For instance, experts believe there's enough oil on the Outer Continental Shelf to replace the current level of imports from the Persian Gulf for 60 years. Yet about 90 percent of this oil and gas potential is off-limits to production.

Granted, when offshore oil production was in its infancy, too little care was given to the environment. However, great advances have been achieved in the technologies used to find and extract oil. Production now is environmentally safer than ever before.

America must expand its oil and gas production. Simply pretending that these resources can be left untouched is not a solution. Those who cling to that fantasy

will end up harming Florida's economy -- *and* its precious environment.

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