

Offshore drilling a mistake for California

Congressman Mike Thompson, American Canyon Eagle, 5-27-10

Thompson represents California's First Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

"This is not 1965, the oil and gas companies can drill off shore now with all the new technology they have and do it safely and not cause accidents," a constituent wrote to me recently in an e-mail.

"Drill, baby, drill" was the call from across the country not that long ago. If you didn't agree that the government should open more offshore area for drilling and exploration, you were labeled anti-American, an environmental extremist, or, worse, a socialist, the latter being the label of choice by some for anyone that disagrees with them on anything.

Drilling off shore is and has been going on for some time. And from day one, drilling proponents have said that new technologies make it safe and that oil spills shouldn't be of concern. We heard it again last month when Sarah Palin spoke at the Southern Republican Leadership Conference in Louisiana. "We don't need more studies. We need more action," she said. "Let's drill, baby, drill. Not stall, baby, stall."

If only we could "stall, baby, stall," the oil that is now spilling into the Gulf Coast. The Louisiana spill is leaking 210,000 gallons of oil per day, up four times from what British Petroleum claimed when it first reported the spill to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It's hard to understand how British Petroleum could be so far off on its calculations. Now it sounds like it may take months to drill a relief well, during which time experts fear ocean currents could move the oil up and down the East Coast.

I have always opposed drilling for oil off the coast of Northern California, and for good reasons. First, there isn't enough recoverable oil to benefit our needs vis-à-vis the risk. But that hasn't stopped some from pursuing leases to explore and drill. Second, our coast is rich in marine life and is one of only four major upwellings in the world. Damage to this fragile ecosystem would devastate not only our district, but an incredible amount of marine habitat throughout the Pacific coast.

Third, our tourism industry is the life blood of many cities in Northern California. Visitors don't buy rooms or dinner or shop in areas devastated by oil spills or cluttered with offshore oil-drilling equipment. Our fishing communities, tourism areas and related businesses up and down the coast generate billions of dollars in economic activity and should not be put in jeopardy by drilling off shore.

Last, but certainly not least, the beautiful, rocky and rugged Northern California coastline would make cleaning up a spill extremely dangerous and difficult.

Some argue that the rough terrain coupled with equally rough seas would make clean-up impossible. And remember, our coast is earthquake prone, which only exacerbates the spill concern.

It is particularly difficult to understand why some would continue to promote this policy at a time of great advancement of renewable energy.

Renewables are many years away from displacing oil and we will always rely on some amount of oil.

However, we need to be doubling down on our efforts to develop renewable energy technology, put these new

innovations into operation and get as far away from oil as we can.

This is a tall order, but we're entrepreneurs, innovators and most important, Americans. We can and we will succeed.