

Congress considers West Coast oil drilling

Susanne Rust, California Watch, 5-4-11

Nearly a year after a BP oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico and created one of the largest environmental catastrophes of all time, federal lawmakers are considering encouraging drilling off the West Coast, including the rich oil beds off Southern California.

Lawmakers say allowing the drilling would ease the burden of high oil prices and provide an alternative to foreign oil.

Supporters, including the Energy Nation, an oil industry advocacy group, say the bills will produce more domestic oil and gas, create jobs, provide revenue for the government and secure the country's energy future.

Critics say the bills (HR 1229, HR 1230 and HR 1231) set the stage for environmental disaster and will have little or no effect on oil prices.

“Not only will the bills expand drilling, they would leave oversight of offshore drilling weaker than it was before last year’s oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico,” said Bob Keefe, a spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Richard Charter, senior policy adviser for Defenders of Wildlife, said the bills would have no effect on the "price at the pump."

"That's decided by oil speculators who run up oil prices till the price skyrockets," he said.

He referred to a study conducted by the federal government's Energy Information Administration, which showed that new drilling off the country's coasts would only reduce gas prices by a few cents.

The bills passed the House Committee on Natural Resources in April, and two of the three bills are scheduled for a vote on Thursday. The third bill, which some call the most sweeping, will likely go to the floor next week, Charter said.

That third bill, HR 1231, or “Reversing President Obama’s Offshore Moratorium Act,” would require the federal government to lease at least 50 percent of available unleased acreage off the West Coast, Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico and much of the East Coast, every five years.

"It's the 'Law of Eventually Drilling Everything,'" Charter said.

Under existing law, the government decides which areas to lease. This new law would effectively double the current level of offshore drilling.

And states, such as California, would have no say in the matter.

“Earlier versions of bills like this generally allowed a state to veto projects,” said Regan Nelson of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

“Californians have consistently made it clear that they oppose new offshore drilling off their coast," she said.

“This bill is so out of sync of what people want. They’re willing to put oil production over all other considerations.”

Supporters of the bills say the need for more domestic oil is urgent.

"Gas prices in California’s Central Valley have skyrocketed to above \$4 a gallon and remained above the national average for weeks," said Rep. Jeff Denham, R-Calif., one of the three local congressmen who voted for the bills.

"We can no longer afford to rely on energy supplies from unstable foreign sources. The time for inaction is over. We must expand domestic energy production to get Americans back to work, bring relief at the pump and create jobs," he said.

Along with Denham, Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., and Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., supported the bills.

Rep. Grace Napolitano, D-Calif., voted against the bills and Rep. John Garamendi, D-Calif., voted against one of the bills and was absent for the other two.

Costa was just one of two Democrats to support the bills. He did not respond to repeated requests for comment.