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Drilling is wrong response to storms

Here's an idea out of Congress that defies common sense: With Gulf of Mexico refineries and drilling platforms disabled from hurricanes, some lawmakers want to increase drilling in the Gulf off Florida. These lawmakers want to open up new lease areas near Florida and strip critical protections for Florida's sensitive coastal areas by eliminating the current federal oil and gas ban.

Under this scheme, we'd create a one-two punch: We'd be dependent on more vulnerable fuel supplies and endanger tourism.

For example, U.S. Rep. Richard Pombo, R-California, floated legislation that would open the eastern Gulf to oil and gas drilling in Area 181, which covers several million acres under the Gulf, most of it off Florida's coast. Pombo withdrew the proposal, but backroom deals are still in the works. Area 181 is Hurricane Alley, with more monster storms swirling every year. It is possible that Pombo's language will appear in the budget reconciliation bill that could be voted on later this month.

Florida's own governor showed his willingness to sacrifice current protections for our state on this very issue. Just last week Gov. Jeb Bush publicly stated that he supports drilling in the eastern Gulf - a 180-degree flip-flop from his position only four years ago when he vehemently opposed drilling in many of the same areas. Bush is effectively undermining a legacy of protecting our beaches from pollution and surrendering to pressures from the oil and gas industry.

How much sense does it make to increase investment in a place where towering 100-foot waves and 170-mile-an-hour winds can toss aside equipment like so many tinker toys? An oil spill there could be carried by currents onto Florida's beaches and marshes, destroying property values and sticking us with a whopping cleanup bill.

How many people would come to a tourist destination with oil-covered wading birds and tar balls on the beaches?

If the prospect of oil spills on our beaches and wetlands isn't enough, remember that even exploration for oil harms our oceans with its large scale seismic explosions, and operating oil rigs themselves cause serious chemical contamination in the Gulf's public waters. To keep the bore holes open, oil companies dump drilling mud and chemicals. The rigs release dangerous levels of mercury - mercury that ends up in the fish you buy at the market and order in restaurants.

The oil companies are using this year's hurricane season to make an absurd case that will bring them more money - and more heartache to the average American. High gas prices don't bother big oil companies, but they cripple the average worker in Florida.

If the hurricanes teach us anything, it is that we need to focus on sane energy alternatives. Technology for solar and wind power is better than ever. And hybrid cars are already on the roads. We have the means, just not the will.

It's time to ask: Is it worth it to spend every hurricane season in a panic - not just over loss of life and property devastation, but over more profits for oil and gas executives?

We don't need another bill out of Washington pushing for more drilling. We need elected leaders who will push for a common-sense energy future here. We've got plenty of sun. What are we waiting for?

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Commentary