

Monday, February 18, 2008

Last modified Monday, July 31, 2006 11:27 PM PDT

Environmentalists rally against offshore drilling

By: EDWARD SIFUENTES - Staff Writer

SOLANA BEACH ---- Against the backdrop of a late afternoon sun and the ocean's blue surf, leaders of several local environmentalist groups urged residents to call on Congress to stop efforts to lift a 25-year-old moratorium on offshore oil drilling.

A crowd of about 30 people attended a rally Monday at Fletcher Cove in Solana Beach, carrying protest signs that read: "Protect our coast; not Exxon profits." Some also carried signs in support of Francine Busby, the Democratic candidate for the 50th Congressional District.



Todd Cardiff, of the Surfrider Foundation, speaks during a rally against the recent House vote for allowing offshore oil drilling off the San Diego coast at Fletcher Cove in Solana Beach on Monday.

Hayne Palmour IV[Order a copy of this photo](#)[Visit our Photo Gallery](#)

Todd Cardiff, with the San Diego chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, said the Republican-dominated Congress is trying to remove obstacles to allow offshore oil drilling despite the will of most California voters.

"You cannot vote for oil and claim you're for the environment," Cardiff said.

A House bill passed June 29 would allow coastal states to decide whether to end the moratorium off their waters. A bill being considered in the Senate would clear the way for opening 8.3 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico for oil and gas drilling.

U.S. Reps. Duncan Hunter, R-El Cajon, Darrell Issa, R-Vista, and Brian Bilbray, R-Carlsbad, voted for the House bill that was approved 232-187. Local congressional leaders have defended the House bill, saying it would give states the power to extend the ban.

The bill, House Resolution 4761, prohibits drilling within 50 miles of shore and states could extend the ban up to 100 miles.

"The deal for California is that as long as the Legislature doesn't want to lift the moratorium, there isn't going to be any offshore oil drilling," said Frederick Hill, a spokesman for Issa.

Congress first imposed a ban on offshore drilling in the early 1980s. In the 1990s, the first President Bush extended the ban for 10 years. President Clinton extended the ban again in 1998 to 2012.

But there has been growing pressure to ease drilling restrictions. And environmentalists say the House bill makes it too easy to lift the popular ban. Even the more-limited Senate bill would be a step in the wrong direction, said Bruce Reznik, executive director of the environmental group, San Diego Coastkeeper.

"It's a smaller opening," Reznik said of the Senate bill during Monday's rally. "But it's still an opening. It's a slippery slope."

Sen. Pete Domenici, the New Mexico Republican who crafted the Senate bill, said he will propose even more drilling, possibly off the East and West coasts, as soon as next year.

Domenici and other opponents of the federal moratorium argue that the country needs to move closer to energy independence and say that the oil and gas can be taken without threatening the environment.

Environmentalists, on the other hand, say they fear an oil spill could spoil coastal beaches and threaten the tourism economies of some regions, such as San Diego County.

"That's what people come to see," said Encinitas Councilwoman Maggie Houlihan, pointing at the ocean vista. "That's what people come to enjoy."

The Sierra Club, a national environmental group, opposed the House bill, saying it "forces states to actively oppose drilling."

The bill would allow states to petition for offshore drilling within 50 miles of the coast and would require states to vote every five years to extend the moratorium, according to the group.

The Senate bill is limited to an area of the central Gulf that is 125 to 300 miles off Florida's coast. It also would ban drilling within 125 miles of Florida's coast.

U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein said she would oppose any Senate bill that does not give similar protections to California's coastline.

"California should be accorded the same protection as Florida gets in this bill," she said in a speech to the Senate. "An oil spill would scar our coastline, costing billions of dollars and destroying vulnerable marine ecosystems."

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