

Drilling plans strike fear in Florida

Written by

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While [Florida](#) debated offshore drilling, six companies and a partnership of several others -- none American -- contracted to explore 22 deep sea areas off Cuba for oil and gas, 50 miles from Key West and some in deeper water than BP's Deepwater Horizon.

They plan to drill within currents that could carry an oil spill to Space Coast beaches in three days and to Key West's chalky white shores in about 15 hours.

Among the main players: Spain, Russia, India, Norway and Venezuela.

"It scares the bejesus out of me," said Mitch Roffer, who runs a scientific-consulting company based in West Melbourne that tracked the BP oil plume. "The worst-case scenario is that you have a hurricane during a spill and the wind would just spread it all over the place."

A year after America's largest oil spill at sea, the prospect of even deeper oil exploration off Cuba has sparked a flurry of legislation to stop the drilling.

While Congress can't control Cuban waters, bills proposed by [Sen. Bill Nelson](#), D-

Orlando, and others warn companies seeking drill permits in the United States to think twice before drilling off Cuba. But energy experts and conservationists see Cuban oil exploits as an inevitability for which the U.S. ought to plan, or suffer the consequences.

Prospectors include state-owned Russian oil giant Gazprom Neft, one of the world's largest energy suppliers, which hopes to drill an exploratory well of northern Cuba this year.

This summer, Spain's Repsol-YPF will drill an exploratory well up to 11/2 miles deep just 65 miles from Key West. The company expects a Chinese-built, Italian-owned drilling rig off Cuba by August.

History of it

Cuba's ability to drill so close to U.S. shores dates to 1977, when then-president Jimmy Carter signed the U.S. Cuba Maritime Boundary Agreement to settle disputes o

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ver fishing boundaries. The boundary was set between the two nations' sovereign waters at the midpoint in the Florida Straits, putting Cuban waters just 45 miles off the Keys.

The U.S. Geological Survey estimates 4.6 billion barrels of undiscovered oil reserves off Cuba.

Cuban officials say there's more. They expect at least five wells to be drilled off northern Cuba within the next two years.

The first would be the Spanish company, Repsol, in a consortium with India's Oil and Natural Gas Corp. and Norway's Statoil. They are among several companies with plans to drill off northern Cuba.

Others include state-run companies from Venezuela, Russia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Angola.

Environmentalists worry some of the companies lack offshore drilling expertise. Russia's Gazprom Neft, for example, drills mostly on mainland Siberia.

Ready to respond?

Some energy experts worry less about the companies involved and more about U.S. ability and readiness to respond to an oil spill off Cuba. Many of the multinationals exploring, such as Norway's Statoil, are already drilling in U.S. waters in the [Gulf of Mexico](#).

With a major spill in Mexican waters,

skimmers, submarines and blowout preventers could be deployed from Texas in hours, experts say. But the 50-year trade embargo against Fidel Castro's communist regime would complicate the U.S. helping contain a spill in Cuban waters.

"Cuba cannot access any of the help that would come out of the U.S. Gulf," said Jorge Pinon, a visiting research fellow with Florida International University's Cuban Research Institute.

Pinon, a former president of Amoco Oil Latin America, retired from BP in 2003 and is now an energy consultant.

"If something happens, do we have the resources?" Pinon asked.

He said he knows Cuba doesn't. And, he said, neither the communist nation nor the U.S. is prepared for a spill, despite the lessons of Deepwater Horizon.

"If this action happens again tomorrow, God forbid," Pinon said, "we're going to go

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through the same difficulties and challenges because we as an industry do not have a 9-1-1 call center."

Stricter rules

After the BP spill, the Obama administration put a temporary freeze on deep-sea drilling permits, while stricter rules were developed.

But by April 8, the federal government had approved a 10th deep-sea drilling permit in the Gulf under the new guidelines.

Meanwhile, several congressmen have tried to stop drilling off Cuba.

U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, a Republican from Longboat Key, introduced legislation to deny U.S. oil permits to any company that does **business** with an embargoed nation, such as Cuba.

Repsol, for one, has about 20 drilling permits pending approval in U.S. waters in the Gulf of Mexico.

Another bill, proposed by Cuban-born Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Miami Republican whose district includes the Keys, would deny visas to anyone who contributes to Cuba's ability to develop oil resources off its coast.

And Nelson's Gulf Stream Protection Act of 2011 would make any company planning to drill off Cuba and also seeking drilling rights in the U.S. to have a sufficient oil spill response plan and the resources to contain

a spill in both Cuban and U.S. waters.

"If oil spilled from a well in the North Cuba Basin, it would coat popular South Atlantic beaches like Miami and West Palm," Nelson wrote in a letter to President Obama. "I am not prepared to take chances with Florida's coral reefs and other marine life, nor with the livelihoods of millions of Floridians who depend on tourism for their economic well-being."

Just 20 days before the BP blowout, Obama reversed a longstanding ban on offshore oil drilling that would have freed the way for oil and natural gas platforms in federal waters from the Space Coast to Delaware.

But the BP spill put debate on offshore drilling in Florida state waters on hold.

Meanwhile, six companies await a \$2 million to \$3 million environmental impact study -- expected to be done in mid-2012 -- of how seismic surveys and other oil-exploration activities would impact

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marine life and habitat.

They have applied for federal permits to survey for oil and gas reserves along 275,460 miles from Brevard to Maine.

While debate in Florida centers on Gulfside waters, drilling opponents see the same risks off the state's East Coast, with much lower chance of reward.

And they fear eventual rigs off northern Cuba could bolster the argument for drilling in Florida waters.

"I guess my argument would be two wrongs don't make a right," said Tony Sasso, a former Cocoa Beach city commissioner and state representative. "It doesn't make it any better to then go and drill even closer to Florida."

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