

Florida flubbed chance to save its coast

GUEST COLUMN

By **REP. JEFF MILLER**

Florida missed an exceptional opportunity this month. Florida could have ensured that no oil or gas exploration took place within 150 miles of most of its coast or within Eglin Air Force Base's Gulf of Mexico test ranges.

But instead of choosing to protect our shores and our military from oil companies, some members of Florida's congressional delegation chose to ensure their reelection in 2006. I am concerned that their risky gamble could backfire.

On July 1, 2007, just 19 months from now, a moratorium protecting the waters off the Florida Panhandle — known as Lease Area 181 — will expire. With the expiration of the moratorium, the Minerals Management Service within the Department of the Interior will be able to sell oil and gas leases within 20 miles of Pensacola.

There is no guarantee that this moratorium will be extended. With rising natural gas, heating oil and petroleum costs, it is becoming increasingly likely that this moratorium will be allowed to expire.

Florida's U.S. Reps. Mike Bilirakis, Cliff Stearns and I worked with the House leadership to construct a plan to give the people of the state control over the destiny of Florida's waters — rather than a federal bureaucrat or a member of Congress from Texas or Pennsylvania.

This provision would have prevented any drilling within 150 miles of Florida's coast (well outside the state's position of 100 miles) and prevented any activity east of the military mission line, where Eglin tests and evaluates weapons systems.

This provision also contained language to trade the existing leases in the so-called Destin Dome, some as close as 17 miles from the coast, for other leases that are at least 100 miles from the coast.

The bill also would have extended the current moratoria until 2017, and given protection to the East Coast of Florida and the Straits of Florida for the first time.

For 96.5 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico, we could have ended the threat of drilling forever.

I've often argued that oil and gas exploration is an issue of states' rights. It is abundantly clear that the state of Florida does not want drilling to negatively affect its beaches and shores. So why not give the people the ability to prevent it?

Since this provision was removed from the House Deficit Reduction Act, the House Committee on Resources has began moving forward on legislation from Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, and John Peterson, R-Pa., to allow drilling for natural gas as close as seven miles from the coast of Florida.

It also immediately repeals all existing moratoria that currently protect our coastline.

This is just the first in what I predict will be a series of attempts to drill in the eastern Gulf of Mexico.

This could have been prevented. But instead of showing leadership to give the state the ability to protect itself from drilling in perpetuity, some Florida politicians caved in to pressure from newspaper editorial boards whose members had never read and probably didn't understand the protective language.

I will continue to fight any and all drilling that occurs within 100 miles of our coast or encroaches on our military mission in the eastern Gulf of Mexico.

I am, however, disappointed that some in our delegation didn't take the opportunity to end the threat to our shores once and for all.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Chumuckla, represents Florida's 1st District.