

The hazards of offshore drilling threaten Florida

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My View

I am guessing that Florida Sen. Nancy Detert, R-Venice, has never eyeballed a Gulf of Mexico oil or natural gas rig at water level, which is why she has blithely come out in favor of the last-minute House bill to allow offshore rigs as close as three miles off Florida's shores.

The proposal was pushed through committee this week by 16 Republican legislators, led by Rep. Dean Cannon, R-Orlando, and by one Democrat, Rep. Yolly Roberson of Fort Lauderdale.

Had Sen. Detert been within fishing-rod casting distance of one of the halogen-lit, 100-foot towers erected by Exxon, Shell or Chevron off the coast of neighboring Alabama, as I often have, she might be a little more worried about the safety, health and quality of life of her constituents.

For example, if she were to navigate toward any one of the fixed or floating oil platforms, she couldn't help but notice the 30-inch letters printed in graphic yellow and red: Danger: Poison - Hydrogen Sulfide Gas.

The first time I saw the same warning on the side of a rig sprouting from the sea, less than one nautical mile from my home in Dauphin Island, Ala., I was not that overly concerned. Yes, I was vaguely aware that hydrogen sulfide or H₂S was one of the compounds used to execute capital criminals in the handful of states that had gas chambers. But I was intent on catching the sea trout and flounder that liked to gather beneath the platform, and I had seen other fishermen tie their boats to the rusty legs of the rig, with nary a care.

But I changed my mind a year ago, Sept. 4, when a cloud of the poisonous gas was expelled by one of the other rigs in Mobile Bay, and drifted over the island, sickening dozens of residents and forcing the evacuation of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab School.

Exxon Mobil confessed to the unplanned expulsion of hydrogen sulfide, which turns out to be a fatally poisonous by-product of all the wells. The noxious, sour-smelling gas is usually burned off by a continuous flame on the rig, which had inexplicably gone out, like a pilot light in the wind.

Rep. Cannon is likely not anxious about H₂S since all of his voters live safely inland, but Sen. Detert's and Rep. Yolly's seaside residents may have cause for concern, when the wind is right.

Heavier than air, hydrogen sulfide settles in low areas, and according to the U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services, can inflict "nausea, headaches, delirium, disturbed equilibrium, tremors, convulsions and skin and eye irritation. Inhalation of high concentration of hydrogen sulfide can produce extremely rapid unconsciousness and death."

Understandably, the oil CEOs from Texas lately lobbying Detert and the others to repeal Florida's moratorium on offshore rigs did not volunteer this information. But our legislators can, if they choose, access a wealth of medical data and death statistics from America's coal mining industry, which has had a long and macabre history with hydrogen sulfide.

Or they can consult with federal scientists who have found mercury in the drilling mud at the bottom of the aforementioned Alabama contraptions, in greater concentrations than what was tested at the infamous Superfund Site of Love Canal in New York.

To be fair, Detert and cohorts claim they want to raise more revenue through drilling leases, and to make Florida and America more energy independent.

Yet the citizens of Alabama, even after selling out its environmental soul to Big Oil half a century ago, have enjoyed little if any of the profits from approximately 50 oil and gas rigs off its shores, and actually pay more for natural gas and home heating oil than any other state in the union. Alabama Gov. Bob Riley has been waging a yearlong fight with oil companies over their "creative" accounting practices that have somehow denied the state and its citizens its pledged commissions - the same companies now making promises to Florida, if only we would agree to foul our coastline and jeopardize our indispensable tourism industry.

As for the goal of energy independence, the U.S. Department of Energy declared last fall that even the most accelerated proliferation of offshore drilling would have no measurable impact on domestic oil supplies in the foreseeable future (at least not before 2030).

Since 1970, 300 oil and gas rigs worldwide have burned, exploded and sunk, wreaking widespread havoc and pollution and causing hundreds of deaths, according to a British study. More recently, more than 150 rigs were destroyed by hurricanes Ike, Rita and Katrina, spilling total of 15 million gallons of crude into the sea.

That is why "Spill, Baby, spill," a variation on last year's Republican presidential campaign mantra of "Drill, Baby, Drill," might be the more accurate slogan for this latest initiative.

Oil executives say, though, that things will be different in Florida, and that new technology for drilling will be less visibly ugly here and safer for the ocean, for fish and for human beings.

But I say that Detert and Cannon need to come up with far better reasons before relinquishing our golden coasts and fragile marine life to the same tycoons who pillaged Alabama.

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