

Ocean current experts warn of risks if eastern Gulf is opened to drilling

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While Congress considers opening the eastern Gulf of Mexico to oil-and-gas drilling, experts on ocean currents warn of a potential environmental nightmare that could reach the coast of South Florida.

If a rig in the eastern Gulf springs a leak, the spill could turn into an oil slick that gets caught in a fast-moving current that runs south to the Florida Keys. The current turns into the Gulf Stream, which could drag the polluted mess through the Florida Straits and carry it north to the beaches of southeast Florida.

This scenario is all too realistic, oceanographers say.

Because of the powerful "loop current" that wraps around the southern end of Florida, experts predict that even a small oil spill along the state's west coast would threaten the delicate ecosystem of the Keys and potentially pollute the eastern shores.

This long-standing concern has flared again because of renewed attempts in Congress to expand offshore drilling.

A Senate committee is expected to approve a major energy bill Wednesday that would open the eastern Gulf to rigs as close as 10 miles from the Panhandle and 45 miles from other parts of the west coast. The drilling measure, one part of a wide-ranging bill, would drastically shrink the drilling buffer, which now extends more than 125 miles from shore.

House and Senate leaders hope to pass an energy bill by the fall. Controversy over the Senate's offshore-drilling provision could jeopardize the legislation, a top priority for President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress.

The provision was introduced by a Democrat, Sen. Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, who said he saw no reason for concern since the rigs would be far beyond eyesight from shore.

Some Democrats and most Republicans in Congress want to tap offshore resources, especially large deposits of natural gas south of the Panhandle. The eastern Gulf contains an estimated 3.8 billion barrels of oil and 21.5 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

Oceanographers and environmentalists say Congress should take into account the Gulf currents before moving ahead.

"The loop current creates a potential hazard of drilling close to shore. If we had an accident, it would come downstream," said Billy Causey of Key West, southeast regional director for the U.S. Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. "We know that oil kills mangroves, which don't come back quickly."

Causey and oceanographers say drilling would need to remain more than 125 miles out to sea to be free of the loop current, which feeds into the powerful Gulf Stream that rushes between Florida and Cuba and then turns north.

"The problem is the loop current does come very close to the Dry Tortugas and all of the Florida Keys as it moves into the Florida Straits," said Frank Muller-Karger, professor of marine sciences at the University of South Florida, who served on the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. "When it wraps around Florida and becomes the Gulf Stream, it goes

very close to the (east) coast of Florida and doesn't peel off until it gets to Cape Canaveral."

He said satellite images show that water discolored from pollution sometimes flows from the Mississippi Delta along the loop current and Gulf Stream all the way to the North Carolina Coast.

"There's nothing to prevent an oil spill from doing that," Muller-Karger said. "It's well within the realm of possibility."

Improvements in deep-water drilling and the creation of tankers with double hulls have greatly reduced the chances of a major spill, but smaller ones still occur.

When hurricanes Katrina and Rita swept across the Gulf in 2005, the high winds destroyed scores of offshore rigs, damaged hundreds of pipelines and spilled 741,384 gallons of petroleum products into the sea, according to the U.S. Minerals Management Service. One of these spills poured about 76,000 gallons of condensate, a toxic form of liquefied gas, into Gulf waters.

Alarmed by the potential impact on beaches and tourism, Florida Sen. Bill Nelson has threatened to filibuster the energy bill _ a delaying tactic that requires 60 votes to overcome _ because of the offshore-drilling provision.

"Florida is a tourism state, and people have a need to be concerned about the environment," said Wes Tunnell, director of the Center for Coastal Studies at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. "They might want to be stricter about things over there."

Experience with drilling off the Texas and Louisiana coasts indicates that chances for a major spill are slim, he said.

"Of course, it only takes one," Tunnell said. "I wouldn't say it's risk-free."

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