

Gulf spill spells uncertainty for new drilling

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(AP) -- In the conservative Florida Panhandle, where Sarah Palin's battle cry "Drill, Baby, Drill" is still visible on car bumpers, some are reconsidering their support of offshore drilling as a growing spill in the Gulf of Mexico drifts closer to shore.

Charter captain Jim McMahon, who spent Thursday catching cobia and King Mackerel, said the spill changed his mind.

"I am pessimistic about this," he said. "It could be devastating to the fishing and tourism industry. People aren't going to come to a beach if they have to step through tar balls."

McMahon isn't alone. A top adviser to President [Barack Obama](#) says no new oil drilling will be authorized until authorities learn what caused the explosion of the rig Deepwater Horizon. And Republican Gov. Charlie Crist, who surveyed the massive oil slick this week and called it "frightening," backed off his support for offshore oil extraction.

"It's the last thing in the world I would want to see happen in our beautiful state," said Crist, adding that there is no question now that lawmakers should give up on the idea this year and in coming years. "Until you actually see it, I don't know how you can comprehend and appreciate the sheer magnitude of that thing."

Obama recently lifted a drilling moratorium for many offshore areas, including the Atlantic and Gulf areas. But David Axelrod told ABC's

"Good Morning America" that "no additional drilling has been authorized and none will until we find out what has happened here."

Environmentalists were already mobilizing around the issue.

"This event is a game changer, and the consequences, I believe, will be long-lasting ecologically and politically - and will be irreversible," said Richard Charter, energy consultant to Defenders of Wildlife.

The full fallout of the spill, however, remains to be seen.

Gibbs and other officials said Obama still remains committed to plans to expand offshore drilling to areas that now are off limits, including the Atlantic Ocean from Delaware to central Florida; the northern waters of Alaska; and the oil-rich eastern Gulf of Mexico, 125 miles from Florida beaches.

On the still pristine coast of Pensacola Beach, bikini-clad Kiley Boster looked out at orange buoys and a boom designed to collect oil that approached an oyster bed and bird sanctuary near the shore.

"I would rather we drill here than spend another 10 years fighting at war and being dependent on oil from other places," she said.

Michael Suarez, a fluids engineer who worked 30 years on offshore rigs, including the Deepwater Horizon, spends much of his free time enjoying the coast but said realistically the country needs to keep running.

"It would be very sad if oil came up here, and I do see the possibility of that, but we still have to drill because we have to have oil and gas," Suarez said, as he watched his grandchildren playing on the sand.

In California, where a spill four decades ago gave birth to the modern

environmental movement, conservationists say fragile plans to expand drilling off the coast of Santa Barbara may have just suffered a fatal blow.

State officials are expected this year to consider a project that calls for new drilling along a stretch of coastline nicknamed the American Riviera. Plains Exploration & Production, also known as PXP, wants to slant drill up to 30 new shafts from an existing platform, passing from federal waters into state waters.

Currently, 27 platforms operate off the Central and Southern California coasts. They produce an estimated 13.3 million barrels of oil in 2009, a fraction of the overall national production.

Opposition to the proposal has been growing. If approved, critics say, the project could open up the entire coastline to drilling. Supporters argue the proposal won't violate California's moratorium on [offshore drilling](#) since it's on an existing platform.

Assemblyman Pedro Nava, D-Santa Barbara, organized a hearing Friday in response to the Gulf spill.

"I think this is a horribly graphic reminder of why California should never embrace offshore oil drilling, especially a proposal that is three miles from the coast compared from the 40 miles where the Louisiana platform was located," he said.

Congressman John Garamendi, a Democrat from Walnut Creek who as lieutenant governor helped defeat the proposal last year, said the Gulf spill "marks a turning point in our national discussion on new offshore [oil](#) drilling. Those calling for Drill, Baby, Drill, need to start including the corollary, Spill, Baby, Spill."

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