

Florida offshore oil drilling may be back on table

January 31 2018, by Gray Rohrer, Orlando Sentinel

Florida is still under consideration for offshore oil drilling, a top Interior Department official said Friday, contradicting an announcement last week from Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke that energy exploration off the coast of Florida was "off the table."

The comments from Walter Cruickshank, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management director, came during a congressional hearing where he was grilled by U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., and U.S. Rep. Darren Soto, D-Fla.

"(Zinke's) statement stands for itself, and we have no formal decision yet on what is in or out of the five-year program," Cruickshank said in response to a question.

Cruickshank later said an analysis would have to be done but that Zinke's statements would be taken into account.

Zinke was more declarative last week.

"We are not drilling off the coast of Florida," Zinke told reporters at the Tallahassee airport, following a 20-minute meeting with Florida Gov. Rick Scott.

For his part, Scott said he believes Zinke and is confident Florida won't be involved in any drilling plans.

"Secretary Zinke is a man of his word," Scott told reporters in Miami on Friday. "He's a Navy Seal. He promised me that Florida would be off the table, and I believe Florida is off the table."

Department of Interior spokeswoman Heather Swift said in an email that "Cruickshank simply said BOEM will finish the legally required analysis of the planning areas, as is always done for all planning areas."

But Swift did not respond to a follow-up question to clarify whether any official decision to ban drilling off Florida's coasts has been made.

Soto said the backtracking by the Trump administration means Florida needs to remain vigilant.

"Clearly we're in the plan and we need to work in a bipartisan fashion to get Florida exempt," Soto said in an interview Friday. "We can't let our guard down."

Cruickshank's remarks throw confusion over drilling off Florida's shores while complicating a political victory claimed by Scott, a Republican and vocal Trump supporter.

Democrats and environmentalists pounced on the news, including Sen. Bill Nelson, whom Scott is expected to run against this year for his Senate seat.

"This confirms what we all suspected: there is no deal to protect Florida from drilling," Nelson said in a statement. "What we saw last week was just political theater, and the people of Florida should be outraged."

Environmental groups were taken aback at Cruickshank's statements.

"The administration is playing 'Hokey Pokey' with Florida's coasts," said

Jennifer Rubiello of Environment Florida. "First they put them in, then they take them out, and now this morning we hear they aren't out after all. We're getting shaken all about."

Zinke announced on Jan. 4 a plan to allow oil drilling off the U.S. coast over the next five years. The plan wasn't final, and called for public comment before ultimate decisions on which areas to open up to [drilling](#) were made. The decision was met with bipartisan backlash in Florida, with Scott and Nelson both decrying the proposal.

Five days later, Zinke flew to Tallahassee to meet with Scott, an early supporter of President Donald Trump, and made the announcement to exempt Florida at the Tallahassee airport.

Now lawmakers in other states want the same treatment.

"I want to know every reason why Florida is so unique that it got that spot exemption," Huffman said to Cruickshank.

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