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3 GOP bigwigs now for drilling off coast

Graham, DeMint, Wilson no longer oppose it

By JAMES ROSEN

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WASHINGTON — If every person has his price, for U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, U.S. Sen. Jim DeMint and U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, the political price on coastal oil drilling is \$4 a gallon.

Graham, DeMint and Wilson no longer oppose oil exploration off the S.C. coast — driven, they say, by constituents' pain at the pump and the national security threat posed by U.S. dependence on foreign oil.

"I care about the environment," said Wilson, a Lexington County Republican. "I care about our hospitality industry. Oil on our beaches would be catastrophic. But when oil reached \$130 a barrel, that certainly got my attention."

The three GOP lawmakers previously backed only natural gas exploration off South Carolina, a less intrusive and less visible form of drilling without the pollution threat of an oil spill.

Graham, of Seneca, cited "the explosion of gas prices and the unlimited demand from China and India" as key reasons for his change on the oil-drilling issue.

"We have to make sure it's done in an environmentally sensitive way," Graham said. "We have to protect the shoreline and tourism. Balance is what I'm looking for. We don't want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. I don't want people on the coast of South Carolina to look at a bunch of oil rigs."

DeMint, from Greenville, said the state could use the tens of millions of dollars from oil and gas royalties for beach renourishment, wetlands protections and Intracoastal Waterway maintenance.

"It's desperately needed," DeMint said. "The states would be in control of the leases and where the pipes came ashore, so South Carolina would be in the driver's seat."

The lawmakers said the portion of the Outer Continental Shelf off South Carolina likely holds substantial natural gas reserves, but considerably less oil, according to preliminary analyses.

In North Carolina, Republican U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole continues to oppose oil exploration off her state's coast. Fellow GOP U.S. Sen. Richard Burr supports exploration.

'IT'S SHORTSIGHTED'

Most of a dozen or so proposed congressional measures to lift the 1982 federal drilling ban would require coastal states to approve oil and gas exploration and would forbid it less than 50 miles from shore.

Led by President Bush and U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the GOP's presumptive White House nominee, Graham, DeMint and Wilson are among a growing number of Republican politicians urging an end to the drilling moratorium.

"If congressional leaders leave for the Fourth of July recess without taking action, they will need to explain why \$4-a-gallon gasoline is not enough incentive for them to act," Bush said Saturday in his weekly radio address.

Bush's aides acknowledged lifting the drilling ban wouldn't give drivers immediate relief.

"If you're looking for any measure that would significantly reduce gasoline prices over a period of weeks or months, those tools just don't exist," White House spokesman Tony Fratto said Friday.

Ann Timberlake, executive director of Conservation Voters of South Carolina, said the debate over drilling in Washington is a distraction from the failure of Congress to pass comprehensive energy legislation.

"It's shortsighted to think drilling is the answer," she said. "All it does is jeopardize our clean beaches just to buy us a little bit of time and prolong our addiction to cheap gas."

COASTAL DEBATE

Along the S.C. coast, folks are weighing their desire to protect the beaches with the need for increased energy supplies.

“There’s no question that action needs to be taken regarding skyrocketing fuel costs,” said Charlie Clark, vice president for communications of the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce. “However, from a tourism perspective, we have to make sure we strike the right balance environmentally and economically.”

Clark said it’s too early in the summer travel season to tell whether high gas prices are lowering the number of visitors to Hilton Head.

But a survey commissioned by the Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce found the cost of filling up is leading some vacationers to cancel their beach trips.

Mike Wooten, former board chairman of the Myrtle Beach Chamber, said improved technology has lessened the threat of oil spills. Rigs 40 to 50 miles offshore, he said, wouldn’t be visible from the beach.

“I’m in favor of lifting the drilling ban,” he said. “It’s foolhardy not to explore our natural resources.”

RISING MOMENTUM

Concerns about oil spills have not slowed the momentum for ending the drilling ban.

McCain reversed his decades-long opposition to offshore oil exploration.

Bush weighed lifting the executive order his father issued against it.

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, a possible McCain running mate, had a change of heart as well.

S.C. Gov. Mark Sanford, also in the running to be McCain’s vice presidential choice, is a GOP holdout, opposing drilling, though his opposition appears to have softened.

Sanford spokesman Joel Sawyer said the governor doesn’t oppose lifting the congressional ban — as long as South Carolina gets the ultimate decision-making power.

Sanford likely would oppose the state moving to permit drilling, Sawyer said, if the federal ban is lifted.

“The governor has opposed offshore drilling and continues to do so because he’s not convinced that the rewards would outweigh the risks to the tourism industry and to the ecosystem along the coast,” Sawyer said.

Sanford recently wrote Bush a letter asking him to help protect a deep-water reef off South Carolina that could be vulnerable to oil exploration.

The General Assembly voted in February to require a study committee to report on the feasibility of drilling for natural gas off the S.C. coast by Nov. 1.

‘A FOND MEMORY’

One of the two S.C. Democrats serving in Congress, House Budget Committee chairman John Spratt of York, said the federal government already has leased to energy companies 147.2 million acres of land that aren’t producing oil or natural gas.

“Before opening up vast new areas, we should know why so little of the land leased has not been explored or drilled,” Spratt said. “I am open to any and all responsible solutions to the high price of gas, so long as we take care of the beaches and coastline that we value so much.”

U.S. Rep. Gresham Barrett, a Westminister Republican, said there’s a good reason no drilling is taking place on much of the leased land.

“These oil companies have leased all of this land, but guess what — there’s no oil on it,” Barrett said.

Barrett, a potential candidate for S.C. governor in 2010, is a primary sponsor of a House measure that would enable coastal states to allow drilling and permit those that approve it to set the distance for rigs from shore.

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis also supports oil drilling. But the Travelers Rest Republican, who aggressively has pushed for money to develop alternative energy supplies, said lifting the ban is only a Band-Aid solution.

“It is essential in the immediate term, but it’s also essential that we not stop with oil,” Inglis said. “We are the world’s indispensable innovators, and we need to rise to the challenge of breaking free of oil.”

Inglis warned the price of gasoline hasn’t hit its peak.

“Four dollars a gallon is going to be a fond memory,” he said.

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