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Guest commentary: Offshore drilling risks outweight benefits to state

By Deirdre Macnab / Winter Park / President, Florida League of Women Voters

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The Florida League of Women Voters believes that Floridians must take note of the environmental risks versus the potential monetary gain when considering offshore drilling.

Florida's greatest assets are its emerald waters, its sugar-white sand, its gorgeous beaches. Oil spills do occur, such as the huge one now in the Timor Sea off Australia. Hurricanes mean our state is particularly vulnerable to this kind of catastrophe. Couple those risks with the fact that past drilling efforts just off Florida's coast have yielded no results and no revenue for the state, and the league believes Florida citizens need to carefully question the Legislature's sudden interest in selling the rights to drill for oil off our beautiful shores.

The facts: Florida's tourism industry is responsible for 20 percent of the state's economy, with tourists spending nearly $65 billion dollars and creating 964,000 jobs. In addition, more than $800 million worth of commercial fish are caught annually and more than $5.6 billion is spent in annual recreational fishing expenditures. Why put the tourism industry in jeopardy, especially given the precarious economy, for dubious potential profits — not to mention our West Coast citizens' quality of life?

Rep. Dean Cannon of Winter Park, incoming speaker of the Florida House, says there's money to be made for Florida by drilling for oil off our shores. His supporters stated last spring that bringing drilling to Florida's coasts would annually net the state $1.6 billion in royalties and taxes. But wasn't it just 2005 when then-Gov. Jeb Bush authorized the payment of $12.5 million of Florida's hard-earned tax dollars to buy out an oil company's contract? In fact, during the 25 years of previous drilling, no commercial quantity of oil was found, and the state only got $2.66 million in revenues. So based on the buyout amount, Florida has already lost money on the deal.

The risks: Dave Mica of the Florida Petroleum Council said environmental risks are minimal with modern technology. But, oil spills do happen, and fairly often in fact. Right now, the very technology being touted as safe has sprung a massive leak in Australia. As of a week ago, reports say it may take 50 days to stop an oil and gas leak off northwest Australia as marine authorities fight to prevent the slick from harming migratory whales and breeding turtles. The leak in the Timor Sea has caused a 19-mile light-oil slick off the Kimberley, one of the world's last true wilderness areas. It is the third-largest leak in Australia's history.

And, right here in America, during 2008, the Coast Guard National Response Center logged more than 33,000 spills. Pipelines and platforms each accounted for more than

1,300, and storage tanks more than 2,400. In 2005, Hurricanes Rita and Katrina caused 124 oil spills, destroyed 115 drilling rigs and petroleum production platforms and more than 457 pipelines in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Remember: Florida is ranked No. 1 in the nation for hurricanes!

Another red light is endangering the federal regulations protecting our coasts. Until 2006, Florida's elected officials were united in their opposition to drilling off of Florida's coasts. If the Legislature were to vote to open up drilling in state waters 10 miles from the shore, what will the impact be on the federal protections that both Republican and Democratic members of Congress have fought for during the past decades?

Conclusion: Florida is strapped for taxes. But opening up our coasts for doubtful dollars, and creating a risk to our tourism economy, should make citizens ask, "Why would we risk this?" And would those funds relieve hard-pressed Florida taxpayers, or would the drilling bring in scant proceeds, just as before, while destroying the protection now in place?

The state of Florida does not have an income tax because of our tourism industry. Damage those pristine, white-sand beaches and beautiful fishing waters and we'll need to replace the lost revenue with more taxes.

Macnab was elected president of the League of Women Voters of Florida in May. She served as president of the Orange County league for the previous four years. Macnab was recognized by the Orlando Sentinel as a runner-up for 2008 Most Influential Central Floridian of the Year.

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