

Gulf Restoration Network
Natural Resources Defense Council
Southern Alliance for Clean Energy
Caribbean Conservation Corporation/Sea Turtle Survival League
Indian River Riverkeeper
Audubon of Florida
Sierra Club Florida
Surfrider
Emerald Coastkeeper

October 14, 2009

Honorable Governor Charlie Crist
Office of Governor Charlie Crist
The Capitol
400 S. Monroe St.
Tallahassee, FL 32399-0001

Dear Governor Crist,

In the coming months, the people of Florida, business leaders, local coastal governments, and elected officials will be debating the pros and cons of lifting the ban on allowing oil and natural gas leases in state waters adjacent to Florida's sandy beaches, sea grass beds, fishing grounds, coral reefs and estuarine preserves. It appears as if some legislators are intent on taking this measure up next year. The decision to lift the ban would be as momentous as the decision to impose the ban and, if made at all, should be made with careful consideration of the entire range of economic, energy and environmental issues. The risks posed by nearshore oil drilling, exploration, transportation and storage need to be carefully considered. We are calling on you to help make sure this discussion is deliberative.

You have already established some principles by which lifting the ban could be considered. The activities must be clean enough, safe enough and far enough to protect our environment and existing coastal economies. Without conceding that any oil drilling, processing and storage meets those principles, we suggest that financial accountability and impacts on existing coastal activities be added to your principles.

While we as conservation leaders have an overriding concern that pollution from major or routine spills and discharges would impact Florida's unique coastal and marine resources and the ecological systems that sustain them, as citizens we are just as concerned with the potential impact to those people whose businesses, jobs and quality of life is based on Florida's world-class coastal resources. These resources define our state, our heritage, our way of life and our economy. For these and other reasons, we oppose lifting the existing statutory prohibition on drilling in state waters.

The proponents of lifting the ban have stated that exploration and drilling is safe, that pollution from spills is very unlikely, and that concerns expressed by coastal community leaders, the tourism industry and conservationists need not be taken seriously. We strongly disagree.

Recent events suggest the opposite of the drilling proponent's claims. Hurricanes in 2005 that impacted the Gulf of Mexico resulted in a number of significant spills. In May 2006, the U.S. Minerals Management Service published an offshore damage assessment: 113 platforms were totally destroyed, and 457 pipelines damaged, 101 of those major lines. During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita there were 125 spills from offshore platforms, rigs and pipelines, releasing almost 685,000 gallons of petroleum products (the Coast Guard classifies anything over 100,000 gallons as a "major" spill). And this occurred despite the fact that wells and platforms were shut down in anticipation of the storms.

Florida Energy Associates, the group promoting oil drilling adjacent to Florida's beaches, has until recently been touting "visionary leadership in Western Australia" as the model for Florida. Yet, Australia is experiencing one of the worst spills in its history, a spill of such magnitude that it is causing that country to rethink its policies on oil development. The Australian spill is happening in the West Kimberley region of the Timor Sea. The area is one of Earth's last untouched marine wilderness areas. As of last week the ongoing spill covered an astonishing 6,500 square miles of ocean. The Australian rig is currently spewing 400 barrels of oil a day into the marine environment. Every 18 days this state-of-the-art rig is spilling an amount of oil equal to the 1993 spill in Tampa Bay that fouled 13 miles of Florida's beaches. The Australian spill began almost 50 days ago and may not be capped for weeks.

Governor Crist, we, like so many Floridians, applauded your courageous leadership on energy and climate policy. You caused our great state to begin to consider our role in climate change, renewable energy and efficiency. We know that you possess a long-term vision for sustaining our state's economy and environment.

We are inspired every time you talk of your love for Florida. We have been blessed with a remarkable inheritance. Our coastal environments and economy are the envy and the destination of the world. We wholeheartedly believe the benefits are in no way worth the risk. We hope you will use your remarkable leadership skills and the power of your office to ensure that this debate does get at the critical issues of safety, pollution and distance, along with financial responsibility and impacts to existing economies.

In closing, we offer to help make sure that you are briefed on the full range of risks and remain available to meet with you and your staff to discuss the disastrous Australian spill and the other troubling impacts of oil drilling.

Sincerely,

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