

Lawmakers push to expand offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico

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Five years after the environmental catastrophe created by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, US politicians are seeking to expand offshore drilling in the Gulf of Mexico.

Senator Bill Cassidy of Louisiana introduced legislation on May 12 that would expand oil drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico beginning in 2017. Currently, oil exploration in the Gulf of Mexico is governed by a 2006 law that prohibits drilling within 235 miles of Tampa Bay and 125 miles of the Florida panhandle until 2022. Cassidy's legislation would shorten that distance to 50 miles from the coast of Florida.

Florida lawmakers, seeking to protect the state tourist industry, have opposed the legislation. Long time senator Bill Nelson, backed by other Florida politicians, has introduced legislation to instead extend the current ban to 2027.

Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush, who was the governor of Florida between 1999 and 2007, previously supported the restrictions on offshore drilling but has since abandoned this position as he seeks national office. Senator Marco Rubio has also come out in favor of expanded drilling. Both are seeking the political and financial support of the energy companies.

The push to expand offshore drilling comes half a decade after the worst marine oil spill in history. The Deepwater Horizon oil rig, located 49 miles off the coast of Louisiana, exploded April 20, 2010, killing 11 workers.

Over the ensuing months, at least 4.9 million gallons of oil, according to official estimates, spewed into the gulf of Mexico, causing massive and ongoing damage to marine life and spreading over an estimated 68,000 square miles of ocean. The oil reached the shores of

Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

BP, the company that operated the rig and bore the greatest responsibility for the explosion, immediately sought to downplay the extent of the leak, continuously presenting and then revising figures far below the official estimates of various scientific and environmental groups concerning the total volume that had been released.

Indeed, it was only through BP's deployment of the toxic chemical dispersant Corexit—which dissolved much of the oil into the ocean water and has itself caused untold damage to marine life and cleanup worker health—that the company was able to avoid the public relations repercussions of massive oil slicks washing to shore.

Throughout the cleanup process BP sought to deny the risk of toxic exposure to participating workers, even after an investigative article revealed that workers were not provided with adequate safety equipment and training. The company failed to provide legally mandated training on the use of Corexit, and workers reported that their jobs were threatened if they wore respirators for protection.

Multiple studies conducted in subsequent years have confirmed the negative effects on public health. A 2012 survey of oil cleanup workers in the *Nation* reported widespread “eye, nose and throat irritation; respiratory problems; blood in urine, vomit and rectal bleeding; seizures; nausea and violent vomiting episodes that last for hours; skin irritation, burning and lesions; short-term memory loss and confusion; liver and kidney damage; central nervous system effects and nervous system damage; high blood pressure; and miscarriages.”

Economic damage to the states affected by the spill, including lost wages and tourist revenues, run into the

tens of billions. BP has spent an estimated \$28 billion thus far on cleanup costs and legal claims and may be fined up to \$18 billion more in the future, depending on the results of an ongoing federal lawsuit.

Senator Cassidy's bill comes amid a renewed push across the political spectrum to expand offshore drilling. On the same day, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alabama introduced legislation that would open new areas of her state to drilling. A bill introduced by Senator Mark Warner of Virginia and Senator Tim Scott of South Carolina proposes opening the Atlantic coast to oil drilling.

In 2014 the Obama administration approved widespread seismic testing for oil along the Atlantic seabed. This seismic testing involves continuously blasting air guns as loud as jet planes along the ocean floor for weeks at a time to map out potential drilling sites. The testing is thought to be harmful to whales, dolphins and other sea life that rely on sound for navigation and communication.

Cassidy put forward his bill only one day after the administration gave its approval to a plan by the Royal Dutch Shell company to drill in the Arctic Ocean north of Alaska in an area known as the Chuckchi Sea, where a previous attempt by the oil company to drill in the treacherous northern waters in 2012 ended in disaster when an oil rig ran aground on a nearby island.



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