

## Panelists make their cases offshore drilling

By [Carolyn Shapiro](#)  
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Rep. Bobby Scott led a panel discussion Monday evening that largely opposed the prospect of lifting a moratorium on drilling for oil and natural gas off the East Coast.

Scott, a 3rd District Democrat, along with two of three other panelists, argued that additional drilling for fossil fuels off Virginia's shoreline would do nothing to alleviate the nation's reliance on foreign sources of oil or to lower gasoline prices. Studies show that the amount of oil available offshore is "not extensive enough to affect the global supply or price," Scott said.

A bipartisan congressional delegation, including Rep. Thelma Drake, R-2nd District, has proposed a bill that would open offshore areas to oil and gas production. President Bush has encouraged lawmakers to lift the 26-year moratorium, which requires annual renewal by Congress before Sept. 30.

Jim Kibler, vice president of governmental relations for AGL Resources Inc., the Atlanta company that owns Virginia Natural Gas, stood as the lone voice on Scott's panel in favor of offshore drilling. No one knows the actual amount of gas buried offshore, he argued, and lifting the moratorium would allow exploration to find out.

Virginia Natural Gas doesn't produce natural gas but buys it wholesale to deliver to more than 260,000 customers in Hampton Roads. "We've got to do something about the price of the commodity itself," Kibler said.

Even if the Outer Continental Shelf contains needed fuel supplies, offshore drilling poses too many risks to the Navy's training operations areas where it conducts bomb and other munitions testing, said state Del. Joseph Bouchard, a former Navy captain and Virginia Beach Democrat who spoke on the panel. "The Department of Defense has concluded that there should be no drilling," he said.

Glen Besa, the fourth panelist and the Virginia director for the environmental group Sierra Club, said the state's coastal communities have too much economically at stake in their tourism and fishing industries to risk potential spills and other environmental damage from drilling. The public should focus its concerns less on finding new sources of fossil fuels and more on ways to combat the global warming caused by the burning of those fuels, he said.

The United States produces less than 5 percent of the global oil supply and consumes about 25 percent of it, Besa added. "We're never going to catch up," he said. "We can't drill our way out of this problem."

Many of the more than 30 audience members expressed their own opposition to drilling and encouraged Scott and Bouchard to increase incentives for renewable fuels and alternative energy technologies such as hydrogen-powered vehicles.

Richard Williams, a Chesapeake resident who spoke after the panelists, said he supported the search for alternatives but also saw the need to explore for possible fuel supplies offshore. He asked rhetorically, "What's wrong with trying to find out what's out there?"

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