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Oil debate lands on Virginia's coastline

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The national debate on offshore drilling for oil and natural gas has Virginia lawmakers taking sides on how disruptive the procedure would be to military operations in federally managed waters off the state's coast - including an area thought to hold more than 1 billion barrels of the fossil fuel critical to the country's infrastructure.

Within recent days, and just weeks before the Sept. 30 deadline for Congress to decide whether to lift the moratorium on drilling, lawmakers have continued to debate the merits of allowing oil platforms at sea.

Rep. Robert C. Scott, Virginia Democrat, last week held a panel discussion in Norfolk. Before the forum, he said offshore drilling would not provide a measurable amount of oil for years and that the practice would present additional obstacles for Virginia because of its resort beaches and military presence.

"We really need to get serious," he said. "I think we need to discuss other [energy] alternatives, things that will actually make a difference."

Mr. Scott was joined on the panel by Delegate Joseph F. Bouchard, who also referred to the military's opposition to drilling and opposed a Republican effort during the General Assembly's special session this summer to dedicate revenue from offshore drilling to transportation projects in the state.

"We do not need to endanger U.S. combat forces to solve our transportation problems," Mr. Bouchard, Virginia Beach Democrat and retired Navy captain, said during debate on the bill, which died in the Senate.

In a 2006 letter, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Donald R. Schregardus said the Navy has "considerable concerns" with drilling in the mid-Atlantic planning area in the outer continental shelf off the Virginia coast.

Federal officials proposed drilling in the area through a program that allows companies to lease plots. But the waters lie within the Virginia capes operating areas, where "the Navy's training and test and evaluation community conducts significant activity," the letter stated.

"Because hazards in this area to operating crews and oil company equipment and structures would be so great, the department opposes oil and gas development activity in this [outer continental shelf] planning location," the letter also stated.

However, state Sen. Frank W. Wagner, Virginia Beach Republican, said Aug. 10 that he has spoken with federal officials and that the Navy no longer has such a

steadfast position.

He said technology would allow for drilling miles away from where platforms are positioned and that areas where the military uses live ordnances would not be considered for lease.

Lt. Thomas Buck, a Navy spokesman, said Thursday that Navy officials stand behind the "spirit" of the 2006 letter but understand the importance of "striking a balance between the nation's energy and security concerns."

Virginia is part of the Atlantic Ocean's outer continental shelf that could hold 3.82 billion barrels of recoverable oil and nearly 37 trillion cubic feet of natural gas.

The area has not been explored for years. Estimates of oil in the outer continental shelf in 2006 were based on available geophysical, geological, technological and economic information, according to the federal Minerals Management Service (MMS), within the Department of the Interior.

A 2006 study on exploring for natural gas in Virginia's coastal areas by the state secretary of commerce and trade found "the presence of economically recoverable supplies" in Virginia's section of the Atlantic outer continental shelf "is not assured," though the state's areas are included in a Mid-Atlantic area that was estimated to hold 1.2 billion barrels of oil.

"Everything is estimates," MMS spokesman Dave Smith said. "Based on that data we have, we believe there's a certain quantity there. It's a very educated guess as to what's out there."

By comparison, federal waters in four regions off the West Coast and in the Pacific outer continental shelf are thought to hold roughly 10 billion barrels of recoverable oil.

Virginia last year became an official participant in the federal leasing program, which includes eight areas that the MMS says could produce 10 billion barrels of oil and 45 trillion cubic feet of natural gas over 40 years.

Officials say the five-year program can generate roughly \$170 billion for the United States by tapping into the fuel resources, and states can share in royalties and revenues from drilling off their coasts. But Virginia's part would be available for lease only if the congressional ban is lifted.

"We tend to stay out of the debate," Mr. Smith said, but "we are absolutely willing to work with the state of Virginia and with the Congress in whatever way they see fit to move forward."