

Former Okaloosa commissioner joins push for offshore drilling

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Harris

TALLAHASSEE — Proponents of drilling for oil and natural gas haven't given up on tapping areas closer to Florida's shoreline despite repeated assurances those waters will be exempt from a White House plan to expand exploration.

The Washington,

D.C.-based

American Petroleum Institute announced

Wednesday a multi-state "Explore Offshore" coalition to support the Trump administration's plan to open previously protected parts of the Atlantic Ocean and eastern Gulf of Mexico to oil and gas drilling.

Former Okaloosa County Commissioner Wayne Harris is playing a key role for API as co-chair for the coalition's Florida team.

Harris claims "15 minutes of fame" in 2010 helped win him his volunteer assignment.

Not long after the deadly Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion caused millions of gallons of oil to be released into the Gulf off Louisiana and as oil pushed ever closer to Okaloosa County's beaches, Harris and fellow commissioners took the risky step of voting to allow county Public Safety Director Dino Villani to implement whatever measures were necessary to protect sensitive shorelines without waiting for state or federal authorization.

"We want to provide Mr. Villani the authority to go forward knowing we have his back, so if anybody is going to get arrested they'll know who to arrest," Harris said at the time.

"That's why they liked me," Harris said Wednesday. "They knew I was experienced and have a vested interest in safety first, and protecting our military and shores and tourism."

Harris said he's already begun discussions with the military to see if offshore drilling can be conducted without interfering with military training in and over the Gulf.

He said drastic changes have been made in ensuring safe drilling since 2010, and he supports drilling well offshore in the Eastern Gulf.

"I don't want to see them off the shore, I want them 10 miles off shore at least," he said. "There's plenty of deep water rigs you'll never see from the shore."

Reminded that it is the environmental risk of the offshore rigs, and not necessarily the rigs themselves, that still make some residents of Northwest Florida cringe, Harris said, "there are thousands of them out there."

He said Deepwater Horizon stands alone as the only oil spill in recent history.

"They had the Exxon Valdez all those years ago, and then the BP spill in 2010, and both brought

The coalition’s Florida team, which is focused on the eastern Gulf waters, includes Harris, former [Lt.Gov.](#) Jeff Kottkamp, former Puerto Rico state Sen. Miriam Ramirez and Florida Petroleum Council Executive Director David Mica.

Mica said Floridians use more than 25 million gallons of motor fuel a day, while the industry is restricted from “some very, very good areas” that potentially have oil.

“We need to do it in an environmentally responsible manner, but we must go forward,” Mica said. “I think that it’s really putting your head in the sand if you think that we’re not going to need a lot more oil and gas into the future and that we can rely only on alternative fuels.”

Many Florida officials, including Gov. Rick Scott, Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Noah Valenstein and members of Florida’s congressional delegation from both sides of the political aisle have denounced the possibility of opening to drilling nearly all of the nation’s outer continental shelf — a jurisdictional term describing submerged lands 10.36 statutory miles off Florida’s west coast and 3 nautical miles off the east coast.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke appeared briefly Jan. 9 in Tallahassee to announce drilling would not occur off the Florida coast. But the Trump administration’s stance has not been formalized and continues to draw questions.

Democrat U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson on Wednesday equated the petroleum industry’s new coalition with lingering skepticism over Zinke’s assurances that waters off Florida will be exempt from the plan.

“Here we go. Like us, Big Oil doesn’t believe Florida is really ‘off the table’ to new drilling — despite what Scott and the Trump Administration keep saying — and now they are making a new push to drill closer to Florida’s shores,” Nelson tweeted. “We can’t let that happen!”

The federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management is expected to release a draft report on the offshore proposal before the end of the year. That will kick off a second round of public hearings.

Drilling proponents have hailed the prospects of exploring for oil and gas closer to shore as benefiting consumers by potentially creating jobs and additional government revenue while strengthening national security.

The American Petroleum Institute said its coalition features more than 100 businesses, organizations and officials from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

In its release, the institute highlighted Florida’s dependence on natural gas, which generates 67 percent of the state’s electricity, and forecast that offshore development could result in \$2.6 billion in private investment in Florida and \$1 billion per year in state revenues.

Kottkamp said the “availability of affordable energy is critical” to Florida’s quality of life.

“We look forward to working with our local leaders to discuss ways to maintain our state’s natural beauty while at the same time expanding opportunities to keep our nation energy independent,” Kottkamp said in a statement.

In November, Florida voters will decide whether to approve a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban nearshore oil and gas drilling. That ban would affect statecontrolled waters.

Jim Turner of the News

