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Offshore drilling is a danger to Florida

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The passage of five years can dull memories.

But the disaster known as the Deepwater Horizon, or BP, oil spill should never be forgotten.

That's especially important now as the oil and gas industry, with plenty of money to throw around in Washington, is pushing to allow the giant rigs to drill closer to Florida's Gulf Coast.

A repeat of the disaster won't be a question of if but when.

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded on April 20, 2010.

Over the next several months, 4.9 million barrels of oil spewed into the Gulf and spread over thousands of square miles.

Thousands of birds, sea turtles and marine mammals were injured or killed.

Beaches, marshes and wetlands were fouled.

Fishing was shut down in much of the Gulf for months.

Even though the Deepwater Horizon rig was off the coast of Louisiana, the gooey oil made its way to Northwest Florida's beaches, and the state's tourism industry took a major hit.

Bookings dropped significantly even in Southwest Florida although the beaches there were spared.

In Washington, energy industry lobbyists are trying to shrink the no-drill zone off Florida's Gulf Coast from 125 miles to 50 miles.

The chorus of the Sirens' song they are singing is jobs and money.

The American Petroleum Institute predicts that allowing rigs closer to Florida's Gulf Coast would create 85,000 jobs in the state by 2035.

It also says the industry will pump \$6.5 billion a year into the state's economy.

Those numbers, of course, are hokum.

Even supporters of the industry told the Sun Sentinel recently that the projections were exaggerations.

What isn't an exaggeration is the damage another huge oil spill would do to the Gulf Coast beaches and the environment.

It's not just Florida's West Coast, however, that is threatened.

The industry, with the approval of the Obama administration, also wants more offshore rigs working in the Atlantic.

Seismic testing is planned in the Atlantic off Florida's coast to determine if there are oil and gas deposits there.

The testing, which in itself threatens marine life, would be the first step toward drilling.

If that occurs, Northeast Florida's beaches would be in the same cross hairs for an environmental disaster as the Gulf Coast.

U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson understands the potential calamity.

He has promised to "use all available procedural options to block it" if the bill shrinking Florida's buffer zone comes to the Senate floor.

Nelson also filed a bill in May to block the seismic testing off Florida's Atlantic Coast.

He's not getting any help from two other notables in Florida's political circle.

Sen. Marco Rubio is busy running for president and has landed on the side pushing for more production.

And Jeb Bush, who fought against drilling closer to Florida's shore while he was governor, is more open to the idea now that he also is running for president.

"Gov. Bush believes in opening up federal lands and water for drilling in a thoughtful way in order to enhance America's energy security," a Bush spokeswoman told the Tampa Bay Times in May.

That's a maudlin way of saying, drill, baby, drill.

Set aside the fact that the focus should be on renewable sources of energy, which should be of considerable interest to Florida because of sea-level rise.

Oil and gas production in the United States is the highest it has been since 1972, and the reliance on imports has dropped dramatically.

Energy security isn't the bottom line here. It's big profits for the oil and gas companies.

The lure of the Sirens' song can disguise the rocky cliffs ahead.

But the passage of five years shouldn't erase the lessons of the BP oil spill.

With drilling close to Florida's shores, as stated earlier, it won't be a question of if but when.

<http://jacksonville.com/opinion/ron-littlepage/2015-08-11/story/offshore-drilling-danger-florida>