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Editorial: Bush, Rubio send wrong signal on oil drilling off Florida

For decades, Florida leaders from both parties worked together to keep offshore oil rigs from creeping further toward Florida's coast. It was an admirable, commonsense commitment that looks particularly smart given the significant damage from the BP oil spill five years ago. But that long history of bipartisan consensus is showing signs of cracking. Two Republicans eyeing the White House, Sen. Marco Rubio and former Gov. Jeb Bush, are leaving the door open to bringing offshore rigs closer to Florida's coast. That is a betrayal of the state and sends the wrong signal to oil drilling advocates in Congress.

Rubio and Bush had an ideal opportunity last week to demonstrate their home state commitment and stake out principled ground in the fast-emerging push by oil state lawmakers to open up more of the Gulf of Mexico to drilling. But neither got behind legislation that Florida's senior senator, Democrat Bill Nelson, filed to block a proposal from gulf state legislators to end a ban on drilling near Florida's coast. It was a self-serving pass by Rubio and Bush, who are looking for every fundraising dollar, and they should not forget their Florida roots.

Nelson is seeking to block a move by Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., to allow rigs as close as 50 miles from Florida's Gulf Coast. The proposal would undo the deal that Congress agreed to in 2006 that bans drilling within 235 miles of Tampa Bay and 125 miles of the Panhandle. That ban, which was established in part to provide a buffer for military training off Florida's coast, expires in 2022. Nelson is fighting Cassidy's bill and filed counter-legislation that would extend the current ban until 2027.

The proponents who argue that drilling is safer in the aftermath of the BP spill are some of same cheerleaders who have long championed more deepwater drilling in the gulf. Guarantees about safety exist on paper, as they did in 2010, when BP offered assurances early on that it could contain the disaster, but that certainly wasn't the case. And for those who believe a 50-mile limit would protect Florida, BP's rig was 49 miles off Louisiana — and the oil that gushed from it went on to foul more than 100 miles of Florida coastline, growing into a slick the size of South Carolina.

Why give oil drillers more territory? The industry has tens of millions of acres available it is not using now. The area under lease and the number of active leases are both below the figures from 2010. There is no reason to come closer to Florida. Officials are still adding up the environmental damage from the BP spill, but lost wages and other damages for Floridians totaled more than \$1.3 billion. Tens of thousands of Florida residents are still awaiting action on their claims. If that is the impact from what happened five years ago off Louisiana, imagine the impact today off the coast of Pinellas County.

Florida's political leaders have long recognized the need to speak on drilling in the same firm voice. By equivocating, Rubio and Bush have opened a dangerous window to a flurry of powerful voices outside Florida's control. Presidential bids test leadership. And drilling presents a serious threat to Florida's economy and quality of life. That has been abundantly clear to

generations of Florida leaders, and it should be clear to the junior senator and his mentor, the former governor.