

To drill or not to drill?

Forum on offshore
oil proposal attracts
about 250 people to
South Walton High

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SANTA ROSA BEACH — Just weeks before the Legislature takes up the issue, supporters and opponents had their say Thursday on a proposal to drill for oil off Florida's coast.

The forum sponsored by the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center at South Walton High School attracted about 250 people. While many visitors already had decided where they stood on drilling, others were looking for more information.

"I want to hear the pros and cons on this issue," said Diane Wilks of Destin. "I have very deep concerns about the negative possibility of drilling on our beaches, but I do want to know both sides of this."

Eric Hamilton, associate director of the Florida Petroleum Council, spoke in favor of drilling. He said it would help the economy and leave a minimal footprint because of new technology.

"We can drill for oil in a way that has a minimal impact on the environment because of new technology with the oil rigs," Hamilton said. "What we want to do in the industry is improve efficiency and reduce our footprint, and we can."

Other speakers were more than a little skeptical.

"We need to leave our beaches

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alone," Eric Draper said to a loud applause. "This is what our economy is about. This is a special gift, it's our inheritance. We need to protect it."

Draper, who represented Protect Florida's Beaches and the Florida Audubon Society, said oil drilling will not increase state revenues, will not lower gasoline prices and will not help the energy industry.

"The numbers just don't add up," he said. "It will cause significant ecological problems. Is that what we want off the coast of Florida? No."

"They say the problem with safety is solved. No, it's not," Draper added. "There is no such thing as complete safety... We just need to say no way."

David McLain, senior policy director of Apalachicola Riverkeepers, said he looked after oil rigs and cleaned up the messes they left when he worked for the military.

He referred to "sacrificial beaches," where oil is allowed to make landfall when crews can't completely clean spills from the water.

"My theory is: Don't make Florida a sacrificial beach," McLain said. "Oil spill cleanup is misleading; I've still got oil under my fingernails. You can never clean it all up."

Visitors had numerous questions. They asked about alternative energy sources, the amount of oil spilled on average, what cars the speakers drove and what happens when the drilling ends.

"I'm not necessarily against it," said Matt Greene of Bruce. "I'm mainly here to listen to both sides of the argument. It's good that we are well-informed on the place we live."