

14 join Nelson bid to bar Cuban oil search off Keys

Lawmakers joined a bid to prevent Cuba from drilling for oil near the Keys as Congress looked eagerly at opening Florida waters to energy exploration.

MIAMI HERALD
MAY. 06, 2006

WASHINGTON - With efforts to open Florida's coast to energy exploration gaining momentum, more Florida lawmakers are turning their sights south, filing legislation aimed at blocking Cuba from drilling for oil near the Florida Keys.

U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Miami Republican, and 14 other House members -- 11 of them from Florida -- Friday joined in introducing a bill that would deny visas to any employees of a company or entity that "contributes to the development of Cuba's oil-exploration program."

Their bill, a companion to Florida Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson's Senate bill filed earlier, would also impose sanctions on any individuals -- or companies -- who invest \$1 million or more to help Cuba develop its oil and natural gas resources.

"My colleagues and I have been working tirelessly to prevent our own companies from ruining Florida's pristine beaches and delicate ecosystem by exploring and drilling for oil off our coast," Ros-Lehtinen said in a statement. "To now have this murderous and totalitarian regime say it wants to drill just 45 miles from Key West is beyond the pale and totally unacceptable."

Her co-sponsors include U.S. Reps. Lincoln Díaz-Balart and Mario Díaz-Balart, both Miami Republicans; Clay Shaw, R-Fort Lauderdale; Debbie Wasserman Schultz, D-Weston, and Mark Foley, R-Palm Beach County; Katherine Harris, a Senate candidate, and Jim Davis, a Democratic candidate for governor.

With the exception of food and medicine, U.S. companies are barred from doing business with Cuba. But the Cuban government -- which does not have the technology for deep-water drilling -- has entered into agreements with several companies in countries including Spain, China and Canada.

Ros-Lehtinen suggested the congressional measures could create enough uncertainty among the foreign companies to affect Cuba's nascent energy exploration program.

"This could have a chilling effect on anyone who wants to have further entanglements with Castro," she said. ``Had it not been for [the embargo against business with Cuba] there would be far more investment there."

Nelson and most of the Florida delegation have long opposed energy exploration in Florida waters, contending that a spill could wreak havoc with Florida's beach-dependent tourist economy.

But pressure to open Florida waters is building as fuel costs rise. Senate Republicans -- anxious over sliding poll numbers -- are expected to push to open up a large swath of the Gulf of Mexico south of Pensacola to drilling.

At a Senate hearing Thursday, that bill's sponsor, Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., told Dirk Kempthorne, President Bush's nominee to be Interior secretary, that the nation's energy needs are greater than any state's concerns.

Environmentalists have criticized the effort to drill, saying it would be better spent on conservation, including higher fuel economy standards.

But U.S. Rep. John Peterson, R-Pa., may revive his attempt to lift the ban on drilling for natural gas off the Outer Continental Shelf.

Peterson has criticized the Florida delegation for its insistence on blocking drilling. He criticized the legislation targeting Cuba, too.

"If we spent as much time and effort trying to address our own nation's energy supply issues as we did trying to address Cuba's, our current energy crisis would be a whole lot easier to fix," Peterson said.

Ros-Lehtinen, however, said some of the potential exploration sites off Cuba are within 50 miles of Key West.