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Policy

Florida Delegation Playing Hardball to Extend Offshore Drilling Moratorium Sunshine State Democrats and Republicans may target NDAA

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Rep. Vern Buchanan, R-Fla., says he doesn't see "any light between Republicans and Democrats" on the issue of offshore drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico. (Bill Clark/CQ Roll Call file photo)

Emboldened by a Defense Department report that expressed worries about unfettered offshore drilling in the eastern Gulf of Mexico, Florida's House delegation is preparing to throw its weight around to win a multiyear extension of a moratorium off its coasts.

The bipartisan commitment from the third largest congressional delegation, reached last week, may affect the \$708.1 billion defense authorization bill that is being considered by the Rules Committee Monday and Tuesday ahead of a vote as soon as Wednesday.

That must-pass defense measure as well as a comprehensive public lands energy bill moving out of the House Natural Resources Committee could be a vehicle for an amendment to extend the moratorium.

"I don't see any light between Democrats and Republicans on this very passionate issue," said GOP Rep. [Vern Buchanan](#), the co-chairman of the Florida delegation. "We are the third-largest delegation, and we have a lot of clout when we are united."

The delegation's decision last week followed a May 10 Pentagon report concluding that offshore drilling activities without Defense Department input would put at risk the national security mission bolstered by military activity in the region. The report urged an open line of communication with agencies identifying drilling sites.

Hoping to extend

The existing moratorium runs through 2022 and prevents any offshore oil activities in the eastern Gulf. Florida is pushing for an extension of at least five years, with an eye toward permanent extension if possible.

Republicans in the delegation have so far prevented the House Natural Resources' public lands energy bill from reaching the House floor because it does not address the issue, Republican Rep. [Francis Rooney](#) said.

"To us in Florida, it's existential," Rooney said of the moratorium.

Rooney, along with GOP Rep. [Matt Gaetz](#), met with House Natural Resources Chairman [Rob Bishop](#) of Utah and other oil state Republicans for about three hours on the evening of May 16 to hash out differences and find a path **forward for both the energy bill and a measure to address Florida's concerns.** Department of Interior and DOD officials were also present, Bishop said.

After another meeting on May 17, Rooney suggested the defense authorization bill may represent the most likely **legislative path to address Florida's concerns.** And one potential compromise discussed Wednesday night, Gaetz said, could be an amendment to the defense authorization bill that would give the Defense Department veto power over certain oil activities in the eastern Gulf.

"This can be easily solved," said Bishop, who himself is unopposed to an extension of the moratorium for defense reasons. **"It just takes people being rational."**

Two amendments have already been filed to the Rules Committee for consideration during the defense authorization debate. One, from Florida Democrats [Charlie Crist](#) and [Darren Soto](#), would extend the moratorium until 2029. The other, from Rooney and Florida Democrat [Kathy Castor](#), would put in place a permanent ban on offshore oil activities in the eastern Gulf and **Straits of Florida off the state's southern tip.**

Recent interest in drilling off the coast of Florida, driven by the oil industry and its inclusion in the latest draft offshore five-year plan put forward by Interior Secretary [Ryan Zinke](#) in January, sparked bipartisan outrage from the state. In response, Zinke indicated that Florida would no longer be in the lease planning process after a high-profile meeting **with the state's GOP governor, Rick Scott, prompting many Democrats to complain that the decision-making hinged on politics.**

Earlier this year, Gaetz and Rooney secured a commitment from Speaker [Paul D. Ryan](#) that some type of protective measure for the eastern Gulf would move this year, though he did not specify what legislation that would be.

Eye of the beholder

The Pentagon report on eastern Gulf activities has become a type of Rorschach test for advocates and opponents of drilling off the coast of Florida. The oil industry and their Capitol Hill backers interpreted the report as a positive indication that a pathway exists with increased cooperation between all parties involved.

"You can read the report any way you want to," Bishop said. **"The way it was written was ambiguous."**

In the Senate, a **measure affecting the eastern Gulf is not expected to make it into the chamber's version of the** defense authorization bill, said Sen. [Bill Nelson](#). The Florida Democrat has made previous attempts to attach a moratorium extension to previous defense authorizations, but has so far been stymied.

"For it to be in the NDAA, we have to get the sign-off from members of other committees [of jurisdiction]," Nelson said. **"But there's some who want to drill who are blocking it."**

Alaska Sen. [Lisa Murkowski](#), the chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said she wants to further review the findings of the Defense Department report before offering her opinion on whether an extension of the moratorium is needed.

Murkowski did note that states have specific concerns about offshore drilling that should be addressed, citing the example of migratory whales off the coast of Alaska.