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Drilling Toward Disaster?: Concern Over Proposed Gulf Drill Sites

PANAMA CITY, Fla. - The federal government is considering a proposal to open up new areas of the Gulf of Mexico to natural gas and oil production.

The proposed areas include a section near the Florida coast, and another closer to the Alabama border.

Raleigh Hoke, communications director for the Gulf Restoration Network, said the oil and gas industry isn't prepared to take on more responsibility.

"Not enough has been done to improve the safety of drilling," said Hoke. "Many of the recommendations of the President's Oil Spill Commission are still languishing, still haven't been enacted."

Supporters of additional Gulf energy production argue the process is closely monitored, and essential for the U.S. to achieve energy independence.

The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, which is responsible for the leasing process, is taking public comment on the proposal.

According to Hoke, a lot rides on their eventual decision.

"In Florida, tourism is one of the biggest industries on the coast and elsewhere," said Hoke. "It's important that our tourist industries in Florida and throughout the Gulf of Mexico are protected."

A group of BP shareholders initiated a class action lawsuit against the company this week to recoup financial losses incurred after the Deepwater Horizon disaster.

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