

Offshore oil drilling's promise and problems  
Public Square participants share views on energy and environmental concerns

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Offshore drilling could provide much-needed energy or create huge environmental problems, panelists at a Richmond Times-Dispatch Public Square said last night.

The debate at the newspaper's downtown offices drew about 40 people, including the four panelists -- two in support of drilling for oil or natural gas and two against.

The nation will continue to need oil for a long time, said Michael Ward, executive director of the Virginia Petroleum Council, an industry group.

"Offshore oil production is one way to reduce dependence on foreign oil," he said.

The opponents said fossil fuels such as oil contribute to global warming. They said money should be invested in alternative fuels such as biodiesel.

"We really need to be moving to a new energy future," said Nat Mund, legislative director for the Southern Environmental Law Center, a Charlottesville-based conservation group.

Chuck Bedell, a retired executive with Murphy Exploration & Production Co., an oil company, said some observers are not sure of the degree to which people are causing global warming.

"I think they deserve to be listened to in the spirit of science," Bedell said.

The opponents indicated that oil spills could taint Virginia's tourist beaches.

"You are going to have to put those economic engines at risk to pursue a small amount of oil," said Glen Besa, director of the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club.

As for energy dependence, Besa said, "We're always going to be dependent on significant portions of our oil coming from overseas."

Bedell said oil rigs today are so high-tech that they resemble the machines of science fiction. "We are in this business to sell product, not to spill it."

Federal officials say 3.8 billion barrels of oil -- perhaps enough to last the U.S. about six months -- may lie off the Atlantic coast.

Besa said that's not much. Ward said those estimates are based on 1970s research, and exploration may turn up big reserves. "We may be astounded."

Ward said developing countries such as China and India are creating new demands for oil.

Besa said the U.S. should develop clean fuels and sell that technology to other countries.

High gasoline prices and concerns over oil imports have heightened interest in offshore oil and gas. Congress and President Bush recently set aside longstanding bans on new drilling.

Public Squares are periodic forums on issues in the news. Last night's, the 20th in the series, followed a new format -- a one-hour debate followed by questions and comments from the audience. The moderator was Thomas A. Silvestri, president and publisher of The Times-Dispatch.

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