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July 6, 2001

Plan to Drill in Great Lakes Turns Politics Upside Down

By PAM BELLUCK

PINCONNING, Mich. — About a quarter-mile inland from the cattail-covered shore of Lake Huron, squared in by trees and reachable only by rutted gravel road, lies one of the latest beachheads in the escalating battle between environmentalists and energy hunters.

It is a three-acre patch of dusty ground with a well in the middle, its pipes arcing into the earth to bring up natural gas and oil from the rock deep under the lake. This well and six others like it in Michigan are the only places in this country where there is drilling for oil and gas under the Great Lakes, the world's largest source of fresh water.

But now, with the Bush administration calling for increased domestic drilling everywhere, even sandy lakeshore wells like this one in Pinconning are suddenly in the spotlight, scrambling political allegiances in the process.

As Congress takes up the issue of whether to drill for oil and gas in the Great Lakes, Republicans in particular have been put in the uncomfortable box of deciding whether to support a Republican administration or heed the popular opposition to drilling in



Allan Barnes for The New York Times
Proponents of oil and gas drilling in the Great Lakes say the land-based wells that would be used pose little threat to the environment. Ken DeShaw is at the head of one of the wells he operates on Lake Huron.

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their home states.

Conservatives like Senator Peter G. Fitzgerald of Illinois have found themselves making antidrilling statements that sound indistinguishable from those of liberal Democrats. On the Democratic side, especially among candidates for governor in industrial Michigan, politicians seem to be competing to appear the most environment-friendly.

The issue has taken on an urgency, not only because of the Bush energy plan, but also because Michigan's Republican governor, John Engler, announced plans earlier this year to lift a 1997 state moratorium on new drilling, which he imposed himself. The state's energy experts estimate that the move could bring up to 30 new wells on the shores of Lakes Michigan and Huron.

Environmentalists oppose the governor, saying the drilling could threaten the lakes and the wildlife areas on their shores.

In response, two bills have been introduced in Congress to try to curb the drilling. One, approved by the House of Representatives in June with support from several Michigan Republicans, would prohibit the United States Army Corps of Engineers from issuing new permits for drilling in the Great Lakes. The bill is awaiting Senate action.

Governor Engler says the bill would have no effect on drilling because the existing wells do not have Corps permits and only the state has the authority to issue them. A corps official suggested Mr. Engler might be correct, indicating Congress could find itself embroiled in a question of states' rights.

The official, Don Reinke, biologist with the Detroit district regulatory office, said the Corps would have the authority only if it determined that the new wells affected the "course, condition, location or capacity of a navigable water," which, he said, the current wells do not.

The Senate is also considering a bill, introduced by Senator Debbie Stabenow, Democrat of Michigan, that would ban drilling in the Great Lakes until the National Academy of Sciences assessed the environmental impact.

The environmental threat is the subject of considerable debate. The wells would not be on the water — none of the eight Great Lakes States allow such offshore drilling, although Canada does. Instead, the energy companies with interest in the lakes practice what is known as slant or directional drilling, in which a well is drilled on land about 1,500 feet from the shore and the pipes tunneled at an angle under the lake.

Supporters of drilling say such an operation makes it virtually impossible for oil or gas to leak into the water, and they say the existing seven slant wells on

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the Great Lakes or 350 others drilled under or near other Michigan lakes have caused no problems. And they cite a 1997 study by the Michigan Environmental Science Board, a government advisory panel, saying that directional drilling poses "little to no risk" of contaminating the lakes' water, but carries a "small risk" of leaks at the well head that could cause ecological harm.

"The whole idea is to be able to tap resources in an environmentally sensitive way," said Ken Silfven, a spokesman for the State Department of Environmental Quality, which regulates the drilling companies.

Mike Barratt, vice president of NewStar Energy USA Inc., which operates the well in Pinconning, said the fears of damage to the Great Lakes from oil drilling were overblown. The threats to the environment include five million tons of petroleum products barged every year on the Great Lakes, Mr. Barratt said, and "one million boats, personal watercrafts, and guess what's used to propel them?"

"I'm not going to build a condo with sewage discharge in the water," he said. "I'm not going to build a golf course on the bluffs. All I'm doing is building a hole."

But public interest groups say even a small risk is not worth taking in the Great Lakes, which also border Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, and provide drinking water for 33 million people. They say threats to the environment include contamination of ground water, brine spills and the release of toxic hydrogen sulfide gas.

"The real risk is the shoreline, the heavy footprint that drilling and processing leave on the landscape," said Cameron Davis, executive director of the Lake Michigan Federation, a public interest group. "You're talking some of the most fragile habitat."

James Clift, policy director of the Michigan Environmental Council, said drilling might also hurt tourism and property values in beachfront communities. Two Michigan communities, Grand Haven and Norton Shores, have voted to keep out drilling, a move that is largely symbolic.

There is also disagreement over how much oil and gas is actually under the lakes. Michigan began directional drilling in Lakes Michigan and Huron in 1979, and 6 of the 13 wells drilled have come up empty.

Mr. Silfven of the environmental quality agency said that each year the seven working wells produced enough to fuel about 2,200 cars and heat about 19,000 homes. The oil and gas companies have also paid the state about \$17 million in royalties, which has been used to buy and maintain parks in the state.

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