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U.S. House takes up Great Lakes drilling ban

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By DAVID POULSON Lansing Bureau

LANSING -- Federal and state policy-makers are clashing yet again on Michigan's environment, this time over the increasingly explosive issue of drilling for petroleum under the Great Lakes.

The U.S. House of Representatives today voted 265-157 to prohibit federal regulators from permitting wells drilled on a slant from shore to reach gas and oil under the bottom of the Great Lakes.

Michigan Gov. John Engler has battled federal environment officials over wetlands, air and farm pollution issues. And administration officials, who support directional drilling, immediately questioned whether the federal government had any authority to regulate that activity.

"In no way will we federalize the lakes -- that will not happen under John Engler's watch, I assure you," said Ken Silfven, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality. "It may make for a good headline, but it would make for terrible policy."

The measure was introduced by U.S. Rep. David Bonior, D-Mount Clemens, who while running for the Democratic nomination for governor has been harshly critical of Engler's environmental policies. He said, "drilling in the Great Lakes is a great mistake."

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But it picked up bipartisan support, including that of U.S. Rep. Peter Hoekstra, R-Holland, whose West Michigan district includes 150 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline.

Hoekstra said he was torn between the appropriateness of the federal involvement and his desire to discourage Great Lakes drilling. Particularly troubling was a recent debate where some of his colleagues pushed to drill off the Florida coast despite voter opposition, he said.

"I'm not sure entrusting this decision to Washington is the best thing to do," Hoekstra said. "But when you get to vote whether to encourage or discourage (Great Lakes drilling), I've got to use that as an opportunity to educate my colleagues that the people from Michigan don't want it."

U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, whose 6th District borders Lake Michigan, also supports the measure.

"It will not provide a lot of oil under anyone's estimation, so why should we take the risk?" Upton said during debate on the issue Wednesday.

Drilling for petroleum through the water is banned by all Great Lakes states. In 1998, Michigan suspended slant drilling from shore in the face of increasing controversy. There have been 13 such wells drilled in Michigan; five under Lake Michigan and two under Lake Huron are still producing.

A panel of scientists appointed by Engler advised in 1997 that such drilling could be done safely, and made a series of recommendations to minimize its impact. The state Department of Natural Resources is developing leasing guidelines that it hopes to put in place by fall.

The state Senate recently approved budget bills that would resume Great Lakes drilling; the measures were stripped out by the state House.

The federal attempt to limit drilling cuts funding for issuing permits. If it makes it through the House, it would still have to be approved by the U.S. Senate. The budget bill that today's vote amended still must be approved by the full House and Senate.

Even then, it is uncertain whether a federal permit is necessary. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issues permits for activities that can affect navigation and wetlands. The slant wells drilled earlier did not have federal permits. U.S. Army Corps officials in Detroit said they would decide on a case-by-case basis when federal permits are required.

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