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ENTERTAINMENT

Lakes' drilling ban draws GOP support

By George Weeks / The Detroit News



It was a bit of a hoax but nonetheless a boost to the mounting wave of opposition to oil and gas drilling in the Great Lakes -- a looming issue of Campaign 2002.

Four Michigan Republican congressmen rebuffed Gov. John Engler and GOP congressional leadership last week to help pass an amendment that prohibits the Army Corps of Engineers from issuing permits for drilling beneath the

Great Lakes.

The amendment was co-authored by House Minority Whip David Bonior, D-Mt. Clemens, who is making drilling an issue in his campaign for governor. House Majority Whip Tom Delay of Texas branded it "the height of irresponsibility -- environmental extremism."

Even some lawmakers who voted for the amendment agree with Engler that it is a stretch to assert that the Corps has jurisdiction over slant drilling from on-shore rigs that reach out deep under the lakes.

In 1997, the Corps told Aztec Producing Co. in Traverse City and New Star Energy USQA of Monroe that their proposed slant drilling from Manistee under Lake Michigan bottomlands would require a federal permit.

The Corps Detroit office said "a tunnel or work under or over a navigable water in the United States is considered to have an impact on the navigable capacity of the waterbody."

But Aztec President Robert K. Robinson said Friday that new drilling commenced near Manistee after the Corps' letters. Engler Press Secretary Susan Shafer says the feds "backed down" without a peep after their letters were ignored. She notes New Star got a Corps letter in July and started drilling in November.

Ken Silfven, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which granted permits before Engler imposed a moratorium to allow study, says: "We told (the Corps) what to do with its letter. This is not a federal issue. It has no impact on the water. The Corps has no authority here."

State officials are preparing to lift the moratorium because they say safeguards are in place. Shafer says no permits are pending. Industry officials say that is because they had been told to hold off until the state is ready to receive requests.

U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, co-sponsor of Bonior's bipartisan amendment and longtime opponent of lakes drilling, says federal permitting is "an approval process the Corps asserts it was given under

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terms of the 1899 Rivers and Harbors Act and the 1977 Clean Water Act."

To me, the most interesting aspect is that the amendment was supported by a majority of the seven Republicans in the Michigan congressional delegation -- Reps. Dave Camp of Midland, Vern Ehlers of Grand Rapids, Pete Hoekstra of Holland and Fred Upton of St. Joseph. All nine Michigan Democrats supported it.

Hoekstra says that while Corps jurisdiction "looks like it's a stretch," his vote underscores that Michigianians believe directional drilling "is a chance we don't have to take."

Upton, who like Hoekstra represents many voters along the Lake Michigan shoreline, says the 265-157 vote for the amendment "sends a strong shot across the bow."

That thought also is voiced by Camp, although he says "it is not clear whether the Corps has any authority in this area." Camp's district now is landlocked, but under redistricting is expected to include Lake Michigan shoreline along Leelanau, Grand Traverse and Antrim counties.

Atty. Gen. Jennifer Granholm, another Democratic candidate for governor, welcomed the congressional action as something that could "close potential ambiguity." All five Democratic gubernatorial contenders support a drilling ban.

Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus, the likely GOP nominee for governor, had no position as of Friday. He is studying whether the benefits of drilling outweigh potential risks.

That presumably includes political risk.

Levin 69, Skupin 20

That's the result of a June 24-28 poll of 400 likely 2002 voters by EPIC/MRA in a matchup between Sen. Carl Levin, D-Detroit, and White Lake Township businessman Mike Skupin, touted by Republican leaders as a possible challenger.

Skupin's fame as a CBS Survivor II contestant appears fleeting. His name was not recognized by 76 percent of respondents. Levin had 95 percent name recognition.

George Weeks is The News' political columnist. His Sunday column appears in the Outlook section; his Tuesday and Thursday columns appear on the Commentary page. Reach him at (517) 371-3660, 335 N. Seymour, Lansing, Mich. 48933 or gweeks07@aol.com.

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