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# Lieutenant governor says Great Lakes drilling debate deserves study

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The Associated Press  
7/9/01 8:36 PM

DETROIT (AP) -- In an apparent deviation from Gov. John Engler's support of drilling for oil in the Great Lakes, Lt. Gov. Dick Posthumus on Monday said the issue deserves further study "to see if it's safe."

Posthumus, who is expected to run for governor when Engler's term ends in 2002, made his comments on an East Lansing public radio station.

"That's clearly one of the more controversial issues," Posthumus told WKAR-AM. "I think the protection of the Great Lakes has to be one of our greatest priorities. I think there have been people that have taken a position ... either it's bad or it's good, based on political purposes or not having looked at all the issues."

Posthumus said he is encouraged that the state's Science Advisory Board has said drilling is relatively safe. Still, he is getting more information on the issue so he can weigh safety issues against the benefits of drilling.

Posthumus said he will decide if he supports Great Lakes drilling in the next few weeks.

Earlier this year, Engler announced plans to lift a state moratorium on new drilling, which he imposed in 1997.

The Great Lakes states -- New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin and Minnesota -- do not allow drilling from rigs on the water. Michigan is the only state that allows directional drilling from the shore to reach deposits under the lake.

The state stopped issuing drilling leases because critics warned of potential damage to the lakes and shoreline residents were protesting. But the Michigan Department of Natural Resources is reviewing the process and Engler has said he is confident drilling can be done safely.

Environmentalists are adamant that allowing drilling would pose a threat to the state's water quality and

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wildlife and have a negative impact on Great Lakes recreation and tourism, which is the state's third-largest industry.

Anne Woiwode, director for the Michigan chapter of the Sierra Club, said she believes Posthumus's comments are based on his plan to run for governor. Opinion polls have shown little support for Great Lakes drilling.

"This isn't a decision based on weighing the issues, it's based on weighing the polling data," Woiwode said. "He doesn't want to come across as being pro-drilling in the Great Lakes."

On the other hand, Woiwode said, Posthumus probably does not want to make statements that would put off the wealthy oil and gas industry.

Engler spokeswoman Susan Schafer said she didn't hear the remarks, but said Posthumus's opinion does not contradict the governor's.

"I think what he said was that he was looking at the issue, in which case he should be," Schafer said. "If he is going to (run for governor), this is an issue that is going to come up during next year's election."

Still, the Michigan Environmental Council is encouraged by Posthumus's comments and hopes the Engler administration will reconsider its position on drilling.

"The fact that (Posthumus) is at least hedging is a positive sign," said James Clift, policy director for the MEC, a coalition of Michigan environmental and public health groups based in Lansing.

Late last month, state House lawmakers stripped a provision that would have allowed oil drilling from a budget bill. The state Senate is now considering that bill.

The U.S. House passed a bill on June 28 to prohibit the Army Corps of Engineers from spending money to issue new permits for drilling in the Great Lakes. It's awaiting Senate action.

The U.S. Senate also is considering a bill, introduced by Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., to ban Great Lakes drilling until the National Academy of Sciences considers the environmental impact.

President Bush has called for more domestic oil drilling, but the administration has not specifically called for drilling under the Great Lakes.

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On the Net:

Michigan Sierra Club, <http://michigan.sierraclub.org>

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<http://www.deq.state.mi.us>

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