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Senate passes lake drilling ban

Ecosystem, tourism, drinking water at risk, supporters say

By Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- New oil and gas drilling under the Great Lakes would be banned for two years under a measure that passed the Senate on Tuesday.

The measure is aimed at preventing Republican Gov. John Engler of Michigan from allowing more slant drilling under the Great Lakes from the state's shoreline.

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Lansing., sponsored the amendment to the energy and water spending bill. It passed on a voice vote.

The amendment also would direct the Army Corps of Engineers to study the risk of drilling under the Great Lakes.

"All of the states surrounding the Great Lakes have a stake in what happens in these waters, as do all of us, because this is 20 percent of the world's fresh water," Stabenow said. "Great Lakes drilling would place the tourism economy, the Great Lakes ecosystem and a vital source of drinking water at great risk for a small amount of oil."

Engler spokesman Matt Resch questioned whether Congress has the constitutional authority to stop the states from issuing a drilling permit.

"The bottom line is that this opens a huge can of worms over whether the federal government can dictate to states how they can manage their (natural) resources," Resch said.

U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., noted that drilling in the Great Lakes is not part of President Bush's energy plan and said the Senate Republican leadership would help fight for Stabenow's provision when the bill goes to a House-Senate conference.

U.S. Rep. David Bonior, D-Mt. Clemens, said, "The Senate action today sends the message that we don't want any drilling in our lakes. ... I hope that Gov. Engler and President Bush will now get the message -- that we're determined to fight to protect our lakes."

The House version of the energy and water spending bill would prohibit the Army Corps of Engineers from spending money to issue permits for drilling under the Great Lakes during the next fiscal year.

But Engler's office has said the states, not the corps, have jurisdiction over new drilling permits and the House bill would have no effect on Engler's decision of whether to allow more drilling.

Of the Great Lakes states, Michigan is the only one that allows directional drilling to reach deposits under the lake from the shore.

Another disputed energy proposal got a boost Tuesday as a House committee voted to approve oil drilling in an Arctic refuge.

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Opponents said they were confident the Arctic drilling provision would be scuttled when energy legislation comes before the full House. "This is just the opening shot," said Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., a staunch opponent to lifting a congressional ban on the refuges' development.

Experts say there are possibly 16 billion barrels of oil beneath the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

In other energy-related action:

* House Democrats said they reluctantly will oppose a package of energy tax breaks, proposed by Bush and GOP lawmakers, because of dwindling budget surpluses.

The tax breaks, estimated to cost \$35 billion to \$40 billion over 10 years, includes tax credits for hybrid-fuel cars and residential solar systems, as well as breaks for alternative fuels and domestic production of oil and gas.

* Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham said in a speech that despite recent easing of gasoline prices and the West's electricity problems, the country still faces a serious energy supply crisis over the next 20 years "if we do nothing, if we continue to ignore the clear warning signals."

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