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# States straddle line over Great Lakes drilling

## Taft, Engler split on fuel exploration

By [TOM HENRY](#)  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

While Washington seems to have cooled to the idea of opening the Great Lakes to more oil and natural gas exploration, the issue is hotter than ever in Michigan and Ohio.

Michigan Gov. John Engler, a Republican, is considering issuing as many as more leases for directional drilling from Michigan's lakefront, while Ohio Gov. Bob Taft, also a Republican, promises to sign any legislation the Ohio General Assembly might pass to prohibit drilling from the Ohio side of Lake Erie.

"We can agree to disagree, but it's important these issues get made at the state level and not in Congress," said Ken Silfven, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, the agency that issues drilling permits in that state.

The opposing views don't support the theory that the issue is based on party lines, a notion that was advanced May 30 when the Michigan Senate passed a pair of bills for expanded oversight of Michigan's drilling program.

In those cases, all Michigan legislators in favor are Republicans and all opposed are Democrats.

The U.S. House and Senate passed bills during the summer declaring the Great Lakes off limits to more drilling for at least two years. Even President Bush sided with anti-drilling activists, stating on Aug. 3 that he will not include the lakes in his search for energy sources.

"We're not going to have Great Lakes drilling. We never proposed Great Lakes drilling, and it was never part of our plan," Mr. Bush said.

The saga enters a new phase Thursday when Michigan's Natural Resources Commission starts discussing the pros and cons of issuing more leases for drilling beneath the lakes.

The commission - the governing body of the state Department of Natural Resources - will meet in Menominee, a small Upper Peninsula town that borders Wisconsin. Those scheduled to testify include U.S. Sen. Debbie



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Stabenow and U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, two Michigan Democrats who co-sponsored the anti-drilling legislation in Congress.

The controversy goes to that board first because - although the Michigan environmental quality department issues drilling permits - the state Department of Natural Resources is the agency that leases bottomland rights.

A Taft spokesman acknowledged that the drilling issue was left dangling for weeks in Ohio by its governor after Sam Speck, director of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, had said that his agency might want to start issuing its own leases.

Ontario has had directional, onshore wells on the Canadian side of Lake Erie for decades, as well as the only offshore drilling rigs on either side of the Great Lakes. "At the time, Sam was leaving the door slightly ajar, but the governor has decided to slam it shut," said Mary Anne Sharkey, the governor's communications director.

She said Mr. Taft will "fight any effort to do it [drill from the Ohio side]," including signing legislation.

Since 1979, 13 wells have been drilled from the Michigan shoreline at angles designed to avoid contact with the waters of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. The technique, which is known as directional drilling, is deployed to minimize the possibility of spills.

Seven of those 13 wells are operational. Michigan has not issued leases since it placed a moratorium on them in 1997 to study environmental concerns.

That same year, it started mandating setbacks of at least 1,500 feet from shore as an additional safeguard.

Mr. Engler and Mr. Speck made their statements as natural gas prices were skyrocketing - roughly about the same time Mr. Bush introduced a national energy policy that places renewed emphasis on increased domestic production of oil and gas.

Environmental lobbyists such as Bryan Clark of the Ohio Public Interest Research Group said activists had a legitimate reason to worry, considering that Vice President Dick Cheney told a Michigan audience in June that the search for new energy sources could include the Great Lakes.

"The fact they [the Engler administration] are moving ahead with the 30 new wells shows the Bush statement has no effect on them," Mr. Clark said. "To dismiss this as some loopy environmental issue is disingenuous at best."

Mr. Bush's recent statements may have overridden the Vice President's remarks, but Mr. Clark is convinced Ohio still needs its own legislation.

"For us, [Mr. Taft's support] is a dramatic step in the right direction. But we will not have permanent protection until [state] legislation is passed and signed," Mr. Clark said.



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