

## **The door is still open for expanded drilling off our coast – that’s a problem for Florida and our national security.**

By Gordon Fornell and Robert Marinan

As a retired lieutenant general and a retired lieutenant colonel with the United States Air Force, we have a collective 35 years of military service. Having both flown and tested many programs on the Eastern Gulf Test and Training Range, we deeply understand the importance of the Eastern Gulf of Mexico for both our national security and the coastal way of life in Florida. The Eastern Gulf is home to the Gulf Test and Training Range, the largest military training and testing range in the continental United States. These uninterrupted waters play a vital role in our national security. We are deeply troubled with the threat of expanded offshore oil drilling that continues to loom on the horizon.

Totalling 180,000 square miles of Department of Defense controlled airspace, the Eastern Gulf Test & Training Range provides more uninterrupted surface and airspace than all other ranges in the lower 48 combined. Its enormous size and strategic placement adjacent to several military installations creates a critical military asset that simply cannot be replicated anywhere else. No other area in our nation offers the same combination of unrestricted space, land-water contrast, and adjacent support infrastructure.

It is these very characteristics that prompted Congress to protect the Eastern Gulf of Mexico from offshore drilling—*A Venture Incompatible With Live Fire Testing and Weapons Training*. Its common sense that we should not be extracting and transporting highly flammable products alongside live fire, munitions testing, or missile shooting. Similarly, we shouldn’t be constructing immovable oil infrastructure in areas used for underwater mine warfare training and countermeasure operations. In 2006, the Gulf of Mexico Energy and Security Act was signed into law, which placed a moratorium on oil and gas activities in eastern areas of the Gulf that are critical for military preparedness.

Unfortunately, this moratorium expires in 2022, and industry is chomping at the bit to expand drilling in these waters. Industry officials have recently re-emphasized their goals of exploiting the resources of the eastern Gulf.

If military access to the Gulf Range dwindles, Florida loses its standing as a prime location for military installations and the resultant defense industry. If our state no longer hosts 20 military bases, the defense industry is no longer a major player in Florida’s economy. In 2018, defense spending in the state generated \$95 billion in total economic impacts and contributed to nearly 915,000 jobs.

Unfortunately, we know from experience that “where we drill, we spill”. A spill off Florida’s Gulf coast would put our critical national defense readiness at risk. Keeping this region free of offshore oil leasing and associated oil infrastructure will guarantee that vital military readiness

activities can continue securely and without interference—allowing our warfighters to train in real life scenarios.

Fortunately, there is a simple, no-nonsense solution to the threat offshore drilling poses to the Eastern Gulf. Congress can and must act to *permanently* protect these waters, and the budget reconciliation package that they are currently negotiating is the best opportunity to enact these changes. The House Natural Resources Committee has already advanced legislation to permanently protect the Eastern Gulf from drilling, and it is now incumbent upon the Senate to advance these same provisions.

Congress must renew its commitment to protecting the Gulf Test and Training Range, the environment, and Florida's economy. We cannot afford to be negligent when it comes to our national security and Florida's special way of life. Our national security depends upon this area for vital military research, development, testing, training, and evaluation of advanced weapons systems as well as military readiness. Simply put, offshore drilling activities and military missions are not compatible and drilling activities off Florida's Gulf coast would put our national security at risk and must not come an inch closer.

A final budget reconciliation package must protect Florida's coast and America's national security by ending new offshore oil and gas leasing in the Eastern Gulf. The time to act is now.