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False Promise:

Drilling for Lower Gas Prices

In the ongoing debate over record gas prices, some people are calling to increase offshore drilling as a means of quick and easy relief. Setting aside the rhetoric, the facts show that oil and gas companies are doing very little with the huge number of existing opportunities for increased domestic production both onshore and offshore.

The vast majority of federal oil and gas resources has already been made available for development. Currently, it's estimated that 81 percent of oil and gas resources on federal lands both onshore and offshore are already available for development or will be pending the completion of land-use planning or environmental reviews.

While the opportunities are there, the oil and gas companies have not moved aggressively to increase production. Since 2004, oil and gas companies have stockpiled and then stood idle on almost 10,000 domestic drilling permits covering 68 million acres of federal land. Offshore, just 10.5 million of the 44 million leased acres are currently being used to produce oil or gas.

If the inactive leases already granted were put to good use immediately, an additional 4.8 million barrels of oil and 44.7 billion cubic feet of natural gas could be produced each day. That would nearly double total U.S. oil production, and increase natural gas production by 75 percent. The oil production represents over 14 years of current U.S. consumption, and 30 years of current domestic natural gas consumption

The question should not be whether to further expand drilling off the shores of places like North Carolina, but why oil and gas companies are stockpiling and sitting idle on the existing opportunities. Rather than debate more risky offshore drilling schemes, we need to be holding gas and oil companies accountable for their malfeasance in failing to act on the existing opportunities.

Congress Overrides Bush's Farm Bill Veto

The House and Senate this week voted to override President Bush's veto of the Farm Bill.

With a House vote of 317 to 109 and a Senate vote of 80 to 14, the legislation now becomes law. This bill correctly focuses on people who need help most. In fact, nearly three-quarters of the funds will be directed to nutrition programs that will assist 38 million American families afford healthy food. It updates the Food Stamp program and increases funding for food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens.

I am particularly proud that the bill increases agricultural research funding for Historically Black Colleges. This is important because minority institutions are usually left out when it comes to federal research funding. A Government Accountability Office study indicated that 1890 Land Grant institutions received less than 2 percent of the competitive funding available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This bill represents a step in the right direction.

The bill also provides for mandatory funding of the 2501 Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Outreach Program. This should help to slow the troubling trend of significant land loss by African American and other socially disadvantaged producers.

Additionally, the bill significantly boosts spending for conservations programs to reduce soil erosion, enhance water supplies, improve water and air quality, increase wild-life habitat and reduce damage caused by floods and other natural disasters.

Of particular interest to my home state of North Carolina, fruit and vegetable producers will have their own place in the Farm Bill for the first time. The bill includes more than \$1.3 billion to support research, pest management, trade promotion and nutrition for the industry.

Also of interest to North Carolina, this bill takes another important step in moving bio-fuels beyond focusing on corn. It reduces the current tax credit for corn-based ethanol by six cents per gallon and creates a new tax credit to promote the production of cellulosic biofuels.

Do-Not-Call List Made Permanent

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced this week that it has amended its rules to require telemarketers to honor registrations with the National Do-Not-Call Registry indefinitely, as required by a law enacted by Congress last year.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which manages the registry, will ensure that numbers placed on the Do-Not-Call list will remain there unless a consumer cancels the registration or the number is disconnected or reassigned.

Under the original law setting up the registry, phone numbers placed on the registry would have been removed after five years. The changes approved by Congress prevented consumers from having to re-register.