Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 28, 2010

The Honorable Barack Obama, President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC

RE: Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster – Protecting Florida's coastline and economy

Dear Mr. President:

The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico and the fallout from the disaster are stark reminders that drilling for oil too close to Florida's coastline imperils Florida's economy, environment and security. We respectfully request that you reconsider the Administration's latest proposal to bring the oil rigs closer to the coast of Florida in contravention of the bipartisan Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act of 2006 (GOMESA).

Thousands of barrels of oil a day are gushing out of the damaged well. Officials estimate that the massive oil slick, now larger than the size of West Virginia, will make its way to the Florida coastline by the weekend. In addition, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection is running tests to determine the cause of a foul, oil-like odor that has permeated Florida's Gulf Coast for the past several days. Fisheries, tourism, the health of the Gulf's pristine beaches are all imperiled by this massive slick looming just ninety miles from the Florida Panhandle. This disastrous event should alter the Administration's plan to bring oil rigs closer to Florida's coastline and the current 235-mile buffer under GOMESA should be maintained.

Under the bi-partisan GOMESA 2006 compromise, 8.3 million acres in the eastern Gulf were opened to additional drilling with a buffer protection of 235 miles off the west coast of Florida. The areas the Congress protected from leasing and drilling have important economic, environmental and military value. The compromise expanded energy production opportunities, while protecting Florida's economy and allowing the military to continue to keep our country safe

The rationale for continuing the 2006 agreement is even more apparent now due to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in the Gulf. Expanding drilling closer to Florida's coast is a serious threat to our tourism economy and jobs, our wetlands and fisheries, and our quality of life. Florida's tourism-based economy depends on having clean beaches. Tourism officials support a robust buffer for Florida's beaches so that we can avoid the devastating consequences of a spill like the Deepwater Horizon disaster. Such a spill closer to Florida's beaches would devastate the $65-billion-a-year industry

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that employs nearly 1 million people. Economist Walter Klages estimated a major spill could cause a 45 percent decrease in visitors over two years. It could also result in the loss of 7,392 tourism-related jobs.

We also cannot put our environment at risk. Dr. Robert H. Weisberg, physical oceanographer at the University of South Florida, warns of potential damage that an oil spill in the vicinity of the powerful loop current would bring. The Loop current circulates warm water from the Caribbean Sea up toward Louisiana, then sweeps it down through the Straits of Florida, around the Keys and up the Atlantic coast to join the Gulf Stream. Pollution from the rigs that settles into the loop current could flow south and coat the Keys, then be pushed north and potentially wreak further havoc. If the spill occurred over the West Florida Continental Shelf –an area of relatively shallow water that extends as much as 100 miles out from Florida's coast –the currents could sweep it to the Tampa Bay area and the rest of the West Coast.

Proposed areas of expanded drilling inside the GOMESA agreement's moratorium area, and directly in the path of Hurricane alley make environmental disaster all the more likely. Despite the widespread perception that no major oil spills occurred after Hurricane Katrina, the truth is that the powerful storm destroyed 113 oil platforms and damaged 457 pipelines near Louisiana, according to the Minerals Management Service. U.S. Coast Guard officials said more than 7-million gallons of petroleum products spilled. By comparison, in the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster, 11-million gallons of gas was spilled. The prospect of a spill like the Deepwater Horizon, combined with the risk posed by the loop current were key reasons for the bipartisan GOMESA agreement in 2006.

GOMESA also protects the military operations in the Eastern Gulf. The Eastern Gulf is currently the only long range weapons and operations testing area on the east coast. Key weapons programs that are currently in the testing cycle, such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, and the AMRAAM missile, require very large footprints in the test range. If GOMESA is not maintained, these live ammunition tests could not be carried out. Furthermore, existing debris from operations poses a serious safety risk for the platforms and personnel.

Oil company claims that drilling is completely safe now ring hollow. With the oil slick as large as it is and likely to make landfall by this weekend, the worst case scenario is visible and tangible. Officials advise that it will likely take anywhere from 60 to 90 days to plug the breached exploratory well. When an oil company's back-up plan takes 60 to 90 days to execute, we know we have a disaster on our hands.

All these circumstances point to the necessity of altering your current plan to bring oil rigs closer to our Florida beaches. The 235-mile buffer is vital to maintaining Florida's economy, environment, and military readiness. Florida is different from other states in the Gulf Coast region. Over many decades, Florida developed thriving tourism and fishing economies rather than industrialize our coastline. Florida's long-term economic health is dependent upon clean beaches and clean oceans.

This spill represents a game-changer for Florida. We urge you to abandon any proposal that is inconsistent with GOMESA. The Deepwater Horizon disaster proves that the 2006 compromise should be maintained. Coast Guard Rear Admiral Landry said this spill could be the most significant in U.S. history if the damaged well is not secured. As Floridians, we will fight to avoid these horrendous catastrophes. Instead, let us work together to protect Florida jobs and our beautiful beaches. Working together, we can develop a plan that does not include such a risky and damaging enterprises, and that will lessen our country's dependence on foreign oil.

Sincerely,

Kathy Castor
U.S. Representative
Florida—District 11

C.W. Bill Young
U.S. Representative
Florida-District 10