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GULF SPILL: With Nelson's voiced opposition, is offshore drilling for climate compromise DOA?

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Sen. Bill Nelson can't cite any colleagues whose position on offshore drilling has changed because of the BP spill.

Except maybe himself.

The Florida Democrat has vehemently fought drilling off his state's prized beaches for years, but when President Obama rolled out his plan to expand drilling in the Gulf of Mexico, Nelson chose not to object. That raised some eyebrows in the environmental community.

But in the wake of the Gulf Coast oil spill, he has lashed out at Obama's plan, saying he is "very dissatisfied" with the Obama plan and deeming it "dead on arrival."

Nelson's return to full-throated opposition, environmentalists say, is not so much a full flip-flop as much as it is an indication of how much ground opponents of drilling had been forced to cede before the spill, even though Democrats controlled nearly all the levers of policymaking in Washington. Nelson himself says his position has not changed.

"I think he's changing his tune," said Bill Snape, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The White House obviously gave him goodies or twisted his arm. So, he didn't support it, but he didn't oppose it. Now, his drilling skepticism has increased, and that is appropriate. What he's saying now is, 'All bets are off.'"

Before the massive spill in the Gulf of Mexico, offshore drilling had a sense of inevitability in the Senate. If the chamber was going to pass a climate bill with limits on greenhouse gas emissions, or even an energy bill to require utilities to use more renewable energy, Democrats were going to have to give ground on

drilling. Two of the three senators drafting the Senate's climate bill, John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.), had long histories of opposing drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the only other place with comparable industry interest. And some senators who oppose offshore drilling said real action on climate change might be a worthwhile trade-off.

The drumbeat of "energy independence" was getting louder. Memories of the Exxon Valdez spill a generation ago in Alaska were fading. Warnings of massive spills were met with increasing hostility by industry and supporters, who said drilling rigs weathered Hurricanes Katrina and Rita better than New Orleans did.

Offshore drilling became the sacrificial offering of the environmental community in the Senate, offered up for the greater good of a climate bill.

"There were some environmental groups who were holding their nose on it if they could get some traction on climate," Snape said.

In addition, President Obama was signaling a willingness to open more areas to exploration, telling Congress in his State of the Union address that it was time to make some "tough choices" on drilling.

Drilling opponents like Nelson faced the toughest choices. Kerry and Lieberman were offering new incentives for states to allow drilling in order to keep their Republican partner, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, on board and win over some Democratic centrists. Obama was persuaded by drilling supporters that spills were unlikely.

"It turns out, by the way, that oil rigs today generally don't cause spills," Obama would say two days after he rolled out his drilling plan.

The backup plan, the “energy only” bill, would promote renewables but also bring drilling as close as 10 miles from Pensacola, Fla., and 45 miles in other places.

When Obama and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced their plan on March 31, Salazar said it represented, “the largest expansion of our nation’s available offshore oil and gas supplies in three decades.” It called for four more lease sales by 2012 and after that would open up two-thirds of the oil and gas resources in the eastern Gulf. Salazar was careful to say that it would protect Florida’s coast and critical military training areas. And it would still keep drilling 125 miles off the Florida coast.

Nelson’s response raised eyebrows in some corners of the environmental community for his lack of protest.

“I’ve talked many times to Secretary Salazar and told him if they drilled too close to Florida’s beaches they’d be risking the state’s economy and environment,” Nelson said. “I believe this plan shows they heeded that concern.”

Still, he said, he needed assurances from Defense Secretary Robert Gates that drilling would not interfere with military training in the area. Those assurances, Nelson said, never came.

Environmental groups, too, parsed words. Many of them looked for what they could support in the plan offered by a fairly new president who they had supported and who was willing to push for a cap on carbon.

And just as it appeared Nelson was being forced to cut the best deal he could, his Cassandra-like predictions came true. Twenty days after Obama’s drilling announcement, the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded 40 miles off the Louisiana coast, killing 11 workers. Two days after that, it sunk, dousing flames but gushing oil into the gulf.

Nelson quickly called for a reversal in the drive for drilling. As the prospect of oil washing ashore on Florida’s beaches grows, he is demanding an investigation into what kind of safety systems the federal Minerals Management Service was requiring. And with fellow drilling opponents Sens. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.),

he is sponsoring legislation to increase BP PLC’s financial liability for the spill.

And Nelson expects that the worries he has had about drilling for years will grow in the conservative states along the Gulf Coast and in the politicians who represent them in Congress.

“What you have is people all up and down the Gulf Coast that are in an absolute panic right now,” Nelson said Tuesday in a news conference after meeting with BP’s global chief executive, Tony Hayward. “Do you not think that’s going to translate through to members of Congress?”

Still, he could not identify any lawmakers whose positions had changed on offshore drilling, or say that there were any at all.

Asked if he was satisfied with the Obama administration’s response to the crisis, Nelson said, “I’ll tell you this, very dissatisfied with the president’s proposal for the five-year-plan of offshore drilling,” Nelson said, “and as I said this morning I think that is dead on arrival when it comes to consideration in the future.”

Nelson said that is no switch from his Salazar-heeded-my-concern statement in March.

“I wasn’t OK with it before, that’s where the press misread it,” Nelson said in a brief interview. “I always said, ‘Don’t you guys even think about less than 125 miles, and it’s all subject to Bob Gates.’”

But the politics of climate change and energy have been scrambled. Though environmental disasters often inspire new environmental laws, the conventional wisdom in the Senate is that the spill will make climate change legislation more difficult to pass. The spill has done little or nothing to weaken support for offshore drilling among Republicans or most of the Democrats who supported it before.

Kerry and Graham say they are leaving their drilling proposal in the climate bill they are planning to roll out next week. It would give states a share of the royalties from drilling off their coasts. It would also allow states to veto drilling within 75 miles of their shoreline. Neighboring states would have no such veto.