

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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## **Nelson to Obama: Drop plans to drill; The Florida senator says the oil rig disaster changed his mind.**

**BYLINE:** STEVE PATTERSON

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FERNANDINA BEACH - As sheens of spilled oil drifted in the Gulf of Mexico, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson said Friday that President Barack Obama should drop plans for expanded oil exploration off Florida's coast.

"I've said to the White House, 'Don't you dare think about your five-year plans [for offshore oil leases] ... We're just not going to let you,' " the Florida Democrat said hours after visiting Pensacola and checking preparations for a potential oil landfall.

Obama proposed expanded oil drilling in the Gulf and preparations for oil and gas exploration along the South Atlantic in March. The Interior Department has been collecting public comments on plans that would be implemented in five year-phases, holding a hearing in Jacksonville last month.

Coastlines in Florida, Alabama and Mississippi are all at risk from the spill that began reaching Louisiana Friday. That oil is flowing from a deep-sea rig near Louisiana that exploded last week and collapsed.

The spill could begin reaching the Panhandle Monday, Nelson said.

People bracing for that moment seemed panicked and not fully prepared, he said, describing a packed meeting in Pensacola's chamber of commerce, where state and local officials and worried residents all came for answers.

"I don't think they thought there would be ... a spill" until now, Nelson said. He said oil industry backers had promoted their safety systems as nearly foolproof.

"Unfortunately, mechanisms fail," he said.

State officials declared an emergency condition in several Panhandle counties, and environmental groups solicited volunteers to stand ready to travel to clean oil-covered wildlife.

Nelson said the state's multibillion-dollar tourist industry and fisheries shouldn't be imperiled for oil's sake. He said the spill may ultimately serve as a lesson that the country needs to develop cleaner energy sources.

Nelson had cautiously supported Obama when he outlined plans to expand Gulf drilling outside a 125-mile buffer around the state and allow early exploration for oil and gas on the South Atlantic coast, including the northern half of Florida.

Asked whether he wanted the White House to indefinitely give up thoughts of drilling off Florida, he said: "Essentially, yes."

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