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Rep.-Elect West's Drilling Stance -- and Refusal to Back Down -- Will Be Closely Scrutinized in Fla.

By ELANA SCHOR of Greenwire

Rep.-elect Allen West (R-Fla.) made an instant impression of outspoken independence upon arriving in Washington, D.C., this week. But voters in his 22nd District of Florida got their own proof of West's shoot-from-the-hip style six months before they voted him into office.

Days after the Deepwater Horizon oil rig began spewing crude into the Gulf of Mexico, Florida Democrats began hammering West for his previous support of expanded drilling along the state's famous coastline. West's "drill, baby, drill" approach, the Democrats taunted -- reminding swing voters of the GOP hopeful's endorsement from Sarah Palin -- "would leave Florida's beaches vulnerable to catastrophic environmental accidents like the one off the Gulf Coast."

West responded without the flinch Democrats might have hoped for, declining to walk back his push for more drilling even as the Gulf gusher began eroding Floridians' enthusiasm for offshore rigs. In a statement that began by calling for "safeguards in place aimed at preventing" more oil disasters, West finished: "Any person permanently taking oil exploration off the table is closing the door for an energy independent United States, thus further enabling our enemies to hold us hostage and fund terrorists that continue to plot attacks against us."

That flair for drama and distaste for what is known as "walking back" a controversial statement came to dominate West's successful bid to unseat Rep. Ron Klein (D) after losing to him in 2008. When Klein slammed West for his ties to a motorcycle group linked to criminal and misogynistic activity, the Republican's camp shot back that the two-term Democrat would "say or do anything to try and defame the character of Allen West -- a decorated war hero."

Even after West toppled Klein in the 22nd District, which spans a two-county stretch of the southern coast and narrowly voted Democratic in the past three presidential elections, the tea party favorite continued to generate controversy. West grabbed headlines last week by naming conservative radio host Joyce Kaufman his chief of staff, only to see the hire evaporate within days, as Kaufman's incendiary views on immigration grabbed headlines.

Pressed on the flap by CNN, West, one of two African-American Republicans elected to the House on Election Day, echoed his refusal to back down on drilling, blaming the "liberal left" for chasing Kaufman from the capital. "I guarantee you, if I was a black Democratic congressman-elect, they would not be doing these type of actions," West said Sunday.
West's consistent support for more drilling along the Florida coast, where rigs are currently restricted to 125 miles from shore in federal waters and banned from state waters, "surprisingly didn't become much of an issue in the campaign," Florida Atlantic University assistant political science professor Kevin Wagner said.

If the Gulf spill had not fallen from the top of the national political agenda, Wagner noted, Democrats might have homed in on West's drilling stance more regularly. Still, he added, in West's district "one doesn't necessarily get hugely punished for fairly Republican stands on issues. ... In a funny way, having a position that's for oil drilling is actually not as harmful because people see it as kind of an economic growth issue, a jobs issue."

Worrisome to greens

West's platform makes a similar link between energy and the economy, comparing the optimal mix of U.S. fuel sources to a "diversified investment portfolio" on his campaign website.

"Now is the time to make America energy-independent by encouraging the indomitable spirit of American ingenuity and developing our full spectrum of energy resources," West states in a summary of his energy agenda. "That means that we must invest in oil, natural gas, clean coal, nuclear, hydrogen, cost-effective bio-fuels, wind, and solar."

But like many other newly elected Republicans who espoused an "all of the above" energy strategy, West's fossil-fuel fandom tends to receive more credibility than his reference to wind and solar. Florida environmentalists are already warning West to avoid a focus on coastal drilling that would undoubtedly draw highly public opposition from their ranks.

"I don't think there's any place you could put an oil rig that he wouldn't think it was a great idea, whether in the middle of the Florida Keys or right off Fort Lauderdale Beach," said Progress Florida executive director Mark Ferrulo, whose liberal-leaning group works on matters beyond energy as well. "I know that's an issue that will put him at odds with a huge segment of his constituents."

To be sure, West's freshman status is unlikely to place him at the forefront of the delegation's environmental policymaking. But his vocal pro-drilling stance could take on new urgency if Florida Gov.-elect Rick Scott (R) translates his criticism of a state constitutional ban on the practice into a public push to roll back the existing limits on coastal rigs.

If Scott presses for oil exploration closer to shore, he could face a more amenable electorate. Florida voters retreated from the heights of their post-Gulf spill opposition to drilling within three weeks of the election, when high-profile state politicians largely stayed quiet on the Obama administration’s lifting of its temporary moratorium on offshore rigs (Greenwire, Oct. 15).
"Looking at the political future in Florida, I think coastal residents continue to want to protect the coast," Environment Florida federal field associate Sarah Bucci said, contending that the state gets "three times as many jobs from coastal businesses" and tourism activity than it would from a drilling expansion.

As for West, Bucci added, "I hope he sees the opposition to offshore drilling in his district and is supportive of moving to clean and renewable energy" as an avenue for bipartisan cooperation.

West's campaign aides, now gearing up for his transition to office, did not respond to requests for an interview on his energy and environmental agenda.

**Looking to the 112th**

Even the African-American Environmentalist Association (AAEA), a pro-nuclear nonprofit whose president has lamented that green groups are "prisoners to the Democratic Party," parts company with West on the question of broader offshore drilling in Florida.

"We'll oppose Congressman-elect West on that, though we're happy he got elected," AAEA chief Norris McDonald said. "It's good to have a black representative on the other side of the aisle."

McDonald said he would watch closely as West, whom he described as "bring[ing] a private-sector perspective to energy policy," makes good on his vow to join the traditionally Democratic Congressional Black Caucus.

The CBC plans to welcome both West and fellow Rep.-elect Tim Scott (R-S.C.), the first black House Republicans in seven years, though Scott has yet to echo West's inclination to join. Whether West can sway the influential CBC's approach to energy remains to be seen, however; the 41 caucus members endorsed last year's comprehensive House climate change bill and typically take a liberal approach to high-profile policy issues.

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