No more oil-drilling in the Everglades. Taxpayers are already funding a $23 billion cleanup. | Commentary
Right now, American taxpayers are in the midst of spending $23 billion to try to clean up the Everglades.

It’s hard to even fathom how much money that is. But if you lined up $23 billion worth of hundred-dollar bills end to end, they would stretch from Orlando to the North Pole and back. Three times.

All that money just to clean up messes permitted decades ago.

Which brings us to today’s question:

Why in tarnation are we talking about possibly permitting another one?
Texas-based Burnett Oil Co. wants to drill and explore in the Big Cypress National Preserve, and both Florida and the feds are considering it.

This is like spending $500 to have your white carpet cleaned — and then inviting your friends over to toss around sandwich baggies full of cabernet sauvignon.

There are lots of environmentally technical reasons to question this plan.

But Julie Hauserman with the Florida environmental group EarthJustice broke it down in terms everyone can understand, saying: “Drilling for oil in the Everglades is exactly as stupid as it sounds.”

It’s an unnecessary risk — one that guarantees some destruction simply for construction of the roads and drilling pads — in one of the most environmentally fragile places in America.

Even if you’re not concerned about the great egrets and Florida panthers whose habitats could be impacted, you should be concerned about your own wallet. Because most every time someone messes up Florida’s natural resources, taxpayers pay for the clean up.

Environmental groups are united in opposition. “The proposed drilling would not only risk our public lands,” said Amber Crooks, an environmental policy manager with the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, “but also the water resources, landscapes, and wildlife that
are emblematic of the Big Cypress.”

Interestingly, members of Florida’s congressional delegation have also come together.

Normally, you can’t get Republicans and Democrats in Congress to agree that water is wet or the sky is blue. But in this case, hard-core conservatives like Republicans Matt Gaetz and Bill Posey have teamed up with reliable liberals like Val Demings and Debbie Wasserman Schultz to unite in opposition.

More than a dozen members of Florida’s congressional delegation signed a letter, noting that they’ve already pledged billions of dollars to restore the Everglades and that “to allow oil drilling in the Everglades would put these investments in direct jeopardy.”

Drilling in the Everglades and even the Big Cypress Preserve certainly isn’t unprecedented. Companies have been trying for years.

In fact, one of the Everglade’s neat natural attractions, the National Park Service’s Shark Valley Visitor Center, involves 15 miles worth of road built during the 1940s when the Humble Oil company tried to extract oil and discovered there wasn’t enough there to be profitable.

That’s a key point in all this: Florida isn’t known for oil. Using rounding, Florida’s contribution to the nation’s oil production is approximately 0%.

We produce less than one-tenth of 1% of what Texas does.

So what are we risking our natural resources for? Or, to put it in terms a Floridian would understand: The juice isn’t worth the squeeze.

Florida has seen its share of minor inland spills, most tiny. Still, even when things go swell, drilling-wise, the operations can wreak havoc on the
environment, since they require road-construction and large trucks.

And Burnett’s track record isn’t spotless. The Army Corps of Engineers said one of the company’s past drilling efforts made “a cumulative adverse impact” that violated the U.S. Clean Water Act — though the Corps later changed its mind and said everything seemed fine. (The Corps provided little explanation for its about-face, prompting suspicions among conservationists.)

Burnett has said it has an “unwavering commitment” to doing right by the land. But most people know that drilling is a risky activity. One of those people is Gov. Ron DeSantis.

Last year, the governor announced he was spending at least $16.5 million to buy 20,000 acres to stop a drilling effort from another company.

“We will permanently save this land from oil production,” DeSantis said at the time, saying the stakes in the fragile Everglades were simply too high.

I’m not sure how you celebrate stopping drilling one place and consider allowing it elsewhere.

State officials say they’re currently reviewing Burnett’s permit requests. So are federal agencies — which greenlit the early stages of the process under Barack...
Last year, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced a massive land buyout that will kill a plan to drill for oil in the Everglades. The state will buy 20,000 acres for $16.56 to $18 million, depending on when the deal officially closes. (Amy Beth Bennett)

Obama and then Donald Trump. Now it will be up to the staffers for Joe Biden and Ron DeSantis.

LATEST SCOTT MAXWELL

No more oil-drilling in the Everglades. Taxpayers are already funding a $23 billion cleanup. | Commentary
DEC 24, 2021

Christmas lessons. From my parents ... and an Orlando man struck dead on the street | Commentary
DEC 22, 2021

In Florida, worthy causes get funding – when lawmakers’ families are affected | Commentary
DEC 17, 2021

In recent days, state regulators raised procedural questions about Burnett’s plans and encouraged the company to rework its application. They should reject the proposal in its entirety.

Not just for the sake of the red-cockaded woodpeckers, black bears and gators that call the Everglades home. But also for taxpayers who are sick of seeing their hard-earned money spent cleaning up environmental messes that never should’ve been allowed in the first place, back when everyone involved claimed no messes would be made.

smaxwell@orlandosentinel.com
People from all over Florida came to Naples earlier this month to protest oil drilling in the Everglades and to press for a ban on "fracking," used to extract deposits. (staff / Sun Sentinel)
‘Extremely loved’ Osceola woman still missing after Wekiwa Springs search fails to find her

40m