Cuba's deepwater rig would be just 50 miles from Florida Keys -- Spill could reach our beaches in just 3 days

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan (FL-13) introduced legislation today to block Cuba's plan to build a deepwater oil rig just 50 miles off the Florida coast. Cuba wants to drill for oil even deeper than BP's ill-fated rig that spilled more than 4.9 million barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico last year.

Buchanan's bill would authorize the U.S. Interior Secretary to deny leases to companies that do business with any nation currently facing U.S. trade sanctions, such as Cuba.

"Cuba's plan to drill for oil in its sovereign waters off the Florida Keys poses a serious threat to our tourism industry and our environment," said Buchanan, noting that experts have said Cuba does not have the means to deal with an oil spill.

The Cuban government has contracted with a Spanish company, Repsol, to begin drilling the new well. Cuba is located 90 miles from the Keys, but its jurisdiction in the Atlantic Ocean extends even further to just 50 miles from our shore. Repsol operates existing rigs in the Western Gulf of Mexico near Texas and Louisiana.

Repsol's oil platform for Cuba is now being built in China and would be transported by sea to begin operating off the Florida coast later this year, according to recent press reports.

"As we have learned from the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, an oil spill can devastate a regional economy and impose serious long-term environmental damage to precious natural resources," said Buchanan. "My bill would help eliminate the threat of a similar spill off the Florida Keys by authorizing the Interior Secretary to deny permits for the project."

Facing pressure from the United States several years ago, Repsol scrapped plans to build a gas development plant in Iran. It's Buchanan's expectation that Repsol would take similar action and abandon its contract with Cuba if his legislation is passed.

The proposed oil well would drill 5,600 feet, which would be even deeper than BP's 5,000 foot well at Deepwater Horizon. "Quickly capping the well would be extremely difficult, if not impossible," Buchanan said. "It would take just three days for oil to reach Florida's beaches if a spill occurred at the site. "

In October, Buchanan wrote President Obama to work with the Spanish government to block Cuba's plan to drill for oil off Florida shores.