By Congressman Vern Buchanan

The economically impoverished nation of Cuba wants to drill for oil 50 miles from Florida's coast. If oil is found in commercially viable quantities, it would benefit Cuba, not the United States.

But the bigger problem is that Cuba, using Chinese-made equipment, wants to drill a well even deeper than BP's Deepwater Horizon that exploded last year in the Gulf of Mexico. Cuba has neither the resources nor the technology to handle a spill, and help from American companies would be greatly complicated by the trade embargo.

It would only take three days for a spill to reach our beaches. And if disaster strikes, who pays the price? Not Cuba or China – but America. The economic and environmental damage would be catastrophic.

We cannot allow this project to move forward.

Last week, I introduced legislation (H.R. 372) aimed at blocking Cuba from drilling so close to our shores. Obviously we can't tell Cuba what to do since we don't have diplomatic relations with that country. So my legislation would attack the problem by allowing the U.S. Interior Secretary to deny American oil permits to any company that does business with an embargoed nation, like Cuba. A Spanish firm, Repsol, is now working with Cuba and hopes to begin drilling later this year. Repsol also has 20 drilling permits awaiting approval for projects in the Gulf of Mexico. My bill essentially tells Repsol to decide whether it wants to continue doing business with Cuba or with the United States.

Current law prohibits off-shore drilling within 125 miles of Florida's coast. The reason Cuba can drill so close is that that the island nation's territorial waters extend to 50 miles off the Florida Keys. U.S. companies have the best deep-water equipment, but cannot participate in the Cuban drilling because of the 45-year economic embargo against Fidel Castro's communist regime.

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. 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.

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

The proposed oil well would drill 5,600 feet, which would exceed BP's 5,000-foot well at Deepwater Horizon. Quickly capping a blown well at that depth would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. We need to do everything possible to prevent another Deepwater Horizon from ever happening again.