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Contact:
TJ Marshall - (305) 586-1961
Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition

**FLORIDA RESTAURANT AND LODGING ASSOCIATION UNITES WITH
ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNITY OVER CONCERNS TO EXPANDED DRILLING**

St. Petersburg, FL (September 15, 2008) — As Congress prepares to vote on proposals for expanded offshore drilling, leaders from Pinellas County's business and environmental community have come together to voice their opposition to expanded drilling near Florida's shores. Keith Overton, Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for TradeWinds Island Resorts and Chair-Elect to the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association as well as David White, Regional Director for Ocean Conservancy, a member of the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition, share the same vision for Florida's future; clean energy solutions for oil free beaches and vibrant coastal waters.

As Chair-Elect to the State's restaurant and lodging association Overton said "The Florida Restaurant & Lodging Association remains committed to policies that preserve and protect Florida's most critical economic tourism asset – its beaches. We urge Congress to carefully consider the reasons behind the current status of off-shore drilling policies in the Gulf of Mexico. We must continue with legislation that considers the broader potential economic and environmental impacts that could occur as a result of any changes allowing closer drilling to our pristine beaches.

We recognize that our elected leaders must find an approach to best meet America's long-term energy needs and to minimize our nation's oil dependency, we just don't want this policy to threaten Florida's most critical economic assets, its natural resources. For Florida, this means we must craft a rational and cautious drilling policy that maintains a significant buffer as far from our Gulf shoreline as possible, using technologies that best protect against any possible leaks or spills which might threaten our tourism economy."

The threats drilling poses to Florida's economy were hotly debated less than two years ago. Florida contributed over 8 million acres to offshore drilling in a settlement to the Lease Sale area known as 181. Florida provided large tracts of Gulf waters for oil and gas development in exchange for a 10 year agreement to protect its shores by keeping drilling at least 125 miles from the panhandle and over 230 miles from Florida's west coast.

"There is no reason to open up even more ecologically sensitive areas when the industry has not yet tapped into the massive area already dedicated to exploration" notes David White of Ocean Conservancy. "Not only did Florida recently provide expansive areas to offshore drilling in 2006, the oil industry already has 6,000 undeveloped leases covering 68 million acres - an area the size of Nevada. Simply stated, we believe there are cheaper, faster and safer options for solving our oil crisis that do not involve putting our ocean-based economic future at risk," added White.

Overton, Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer for world renowned TradeWinds Island Resorts shares similar concerns for Pinellas County's business community, "I am very concerned about the threat offshore drilling poses to coastal businesses" noted Keith Overton of TradeWinds Island Resorts. "For over 25 years TradeWinds Resorts has contributed to the success of Florida's now \$65 billion tourism economy and we oppose expansions to offshore drilling which place natural resources essential to coastal businesses such as TradeWinds at risk."

Florida's tourism economy, including coastal businesses, employ almost 1 million people statewide, attracting over 84 million visitors to Florida every year. The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition brings together business, civic, recreational and environmental organizations across Florida to protect and preserve the State's unique marine related natural resources. The Coalition recently sent a letter to Florida's Congressional Delegation, endorsed by over 60 groups, expressing concern for the untenable risks that expanded drilling creates (www.flcoastalandocean.org/flocs). The letter outlines the numerous, treasured marine resources the Nation has invested billions to protect which would unnecessarily be placed at risk.

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The Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition is a collaborative effort of conservation organizations which have joined forces to conserve, protect and restore Florida's coastal and marine environments, including restoring marine ecosystems and ensuring robust fisheries. The Coalition's steering committee organizations represent millions of citizens across the country and over 200,000 members, businesses and activists in Florida deeply concerned for the unique marine resources of the State.

For more information on the Florida Coastal and Ocean Coalition and its publications go to:
www.flcoastalandocean.org