

Schmidt criticized for false drilling claims

Cincinnati Enquirer, The (OH) - June 17, 2008

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Ohio Republican said Cuba sold drilling rights to China

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Jean Schmidt is being criticized for repeating false information about Chinese oil drilling in a speech on the House floor.

In the June 5 speech, Schmidt said there is "drilling activity off of our country's coast," but not by U.S. companies, which are barred from drilling there.

"Instead, the Chinese are drilling off the coast of Florida with their new energy partner, Cuba," Schmidt (R-District 2) said in a speech now forever preserved in the Congressional Record.

Vice President Dick Cheney, who made a similar claim, has issued a statement acknowledging that the Chinese are not drilling in that area, and Florida GOP Sen. Mel Martinez called the rumor "simply false."

"They are akin to urban legends," Martinez said on the Senate floor.

The references to Cuba were part of Republican arguments the U.S. needs to open up new areas to oil drilling to ease gas prices and that Democrats have blocked such moves.

On Monday, Democrats demanded Schmidt retract her remarks.

"Jean Schmidt needs to come clean just as Dick Cheney was forced to do on this and admit that she lied and distorted the facts for selfish political advantage at a time when her constituents are struggling to pay skyrocketing gas prices," Ryan Rudominer of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee said.

Schmidt campaign spokesman Bruce Pfaff said he hasn't talked to Schmidt or her office staff yet about the statement.

"This just came up," he said. "We will have a discussion. To us, the real discussion needs to be about which country Cuba is selling the rights to oil to and that communist governments understand the laws of supply and demand better than congressional Democrats."

Pfaff said the information came from "media sources."

When asked which sources, Pfaff cited a New York Times story and said other members of Congress also have referenced the claim.

In a statement to The Miami Herald, Cheney said, "It is our understanding that, although Cuba has leased out exploration blocks 60 miles off the coast of southern Florida, which is closer than American firms are allowed to operate in that area, no Chinese firm is drilling there."

In 2005, Schmidt made comments on the House floor that drew even more criticism. She drew boos and angry shouts from Democrats by implying that a Democratic congressman who wanted to pull troops out of Iraq was a coward. Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., a decorated former Marine colonel, had pushed a measure to a vote to pull out U.S. troops.

Schmidt said "cowards cut and run. Marines never do."

Afterward, Schmidt apologized to lawmakers, saying that her statements were not directed at any particular House member.

Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: 1B

Dateline: Cincinnati

Record Number: cin30636374

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