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Bill to increase gas tax by five cents if approved

AUSTIN (AP) — The state's 20-cent gas tax would go up by a nickel to bring in more money for highway construction projects, education and the state Department of Public Safety (DPS) if a bill filed Wednesday is approved.

State Rep. Kip Averitt, R-Waco, said the bill he and Clyde Alexander, D-Athens, are sponsoring would cost a consumer with a car that has a 20-gallon gas tank about \$1 more at the pump.

The additional revenues generated from the increased tax would bring in about \$1 billion a biennium for highway construction projects, Averitt said. Another \$300 million would go to education and \$25 million would go to the DPS, Averitt said.

Gas taxes are dedicated revenues that fund road construction, education and the DPS.

"Increase funding for highway construction is forefront this legislative session," Averitt said. "So it's a question of do we need to improve our highway system. Gov. Rick Perry and legislative leaders haven't had any tax increases."

Perry and others have been pushing the use of Anticipation Revenue Vehicle bonds, known as GARVEE bonds, which leverage future income in the way dollars to build roads sooner. Traditionally, Texas has been a pay-as-you-go state when it comes to building highways.

Averitt said bonds put the financing burden on the future.

"A five-cent increase in the gasoline tax is a common sense, fiscally conservative approach to increasing funding for Texas highways," Averitt said.

Oil discovery may be Gulf's third largest

HOUSTON (AP) — A new deepwater Gulf of Mexico discovery contains an estimated 500 million barrels of oil in what two petroleum companies contend is the region's third largest such find.

Crazy Horse North, the new field, is five miles northwest of its namesake, the Crazy Horse field, which oil prospectors say holds an estimated 1 billion barrels of oil — the Gulf's largest field ever found.

Executives at BP Amoco and Exxon Mobil suspected after the Crazy Horse field was discovered that another substantial reservoir lay nearby, said Jim Farnsworth, BP's vice president of deepwater exploration.

"We had an inkling that there was a separate structure to the north, but we viewed it as a higher risk," Farnsworth told the *Houston Chronicle* for Wednesday's online edition. "After we drilled the first prospect well, we took a leap of faith trying this."

London-based oil giant BP Amoco, which last year became the second major petroleum company to own Houston-based Vastar Resources, is now the largest producer in Gulf waters up to 1,500 feet deep.

The company, second only to Shell Oil Co. in production in all Gulf water depths, owns 75 percent and operates both Crazy Horse and Crazy Horse North fields, with Exxon Mobil owning the remaining 25 percent.

Crazy Horse North and Crazy Horse North together will hold estimated reserves in excess of 1.5 billion barrels, according to BP. Company officials have predicted that the Crazy Horse discoveries, among others, will allow them to produce 800,000 barrels a day from the deepwater Gulf over the next decade, compared with current totals of about 150,000 a day.

Dave Blackwood, BP's vice president of deepwater development, said Crazy Horse and Crazy Horse North are expected to be in full production by 2005.

The discovery well in the Crazy Horse North field, drilled on Mississippi Canyon Block 776 five miles northwest of the original Crazy Horse site discovered in 1999, encountered 581 feet of oil in three intervals. Drillship Discoverer 534, which drilled in 5,640 feet of water, reached a total depth of 26,046 feet from the Gulf's surface.

News in Brief Prison lieutenant pleads guilty to cover ups in assault

BEAUMONT (AP) — A lieutenant at an East Texas federal prison resigned Wednesday after admitting to approving reports to cover up assault on inmates.

Bryan Small, 34, pleaded guilty Tuesday to conspiring to obstruct justice before Magistrate Judge Wendell Ford, said Duncan Wood, spokesman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Beaumont.

Woodford said Small, a 10-year veteran with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, supervised guards at the Beaumont penitentiary.

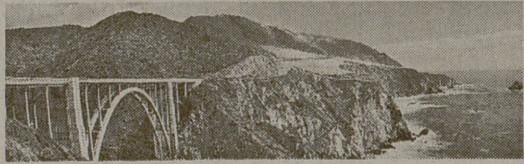
U.S. Attorney Mike Bradford said Wednesday federal agents are investigating a series of inmate assaults that took place at the Federal Correctional Institution at Beaumont over several months in 1999.

He declined to say how many inmates were assaulted or if they were hurt. He said none of the injuries were life-threatening.

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