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## Too Many Risks to Drill Off Virginia

IT TAKES a lot of assumptions to conclude that offshore drilling will benefit Virginia:

- That the Navy will reverse years of analysis and decide that drilling poses no danger to its training mission offshore or its installations onshore.
- That oil companies won't imperil Hampton Roads' tourism and commercial fishing with a spill, as has happened everywhere else.
- That despite years of resistance, every state in America will now agree to simply hand over royalties to Virginia.
- That Maryland and North Carolina won't care when Virginia tries to seize their territory.
- That oil jobs - notoriously transient and temporary - will abandon places like Texas and Louisiana for Hampton Roads.
- That a time with some of the lowest gas prices in recent history is also the time to start drilling for some of the most expensive oil and gas on the planet.

Despite all that, the White House' decision Tuesday to allow drilling off four Southeastern states was cheered by pro-petroleum politicians and their supporters. Among the parcels included was "Lease Sale 220," off Virginia's coast.

The federal decision comes less than five years after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico. That disaster killed 11 and fouled huge swaths of the Gulf of Mexico. The environmental damage is inestimable. A federal judge called the accident the result of recklessness and gross negligence, which hasn't stopped the companies responsible from fighting to avoid paying for the damage.

That's not the model for corporate rectitude anybody wants 50 miles off the coast of Virginia.

The scope of the Deepwater Horizon disaster temporarily halted efforts to open Virginia's coast, but memories are short. Politicians from Virginia Beach Mayor Will Sessoms to U.S. Sens. Mark Warner and Tim Kaine cheered this week's decision.

U.S. Rep. Scott Rigell, as he has before, claimed that offshore drilling would "create 25,000 good-paying jobs for Virginians." The source of that number - which has risen from 19,000 in recent years - is a study commissioned by the American Petroleum Institute. The same report concludes that Atlantic coast offshore drilling would produce 279,562 jobs by 2035.

It's not likely to do so without imperiling others.

The U.S. Navy uses the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Virginia for training. In 2010, the military concluded that 72 percent of the "Lease Sale 220 area should have no oil or gas activity due to our intensive training and testing in the area and the danger this would present to oil and gas industry personnel and property."

Sessoms, Warner, Kaine and Rigell - indeed, every elected official in Virginia - is acutely aware that Oceana Naval Air Station was nearly gutted in 2005, after the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission decided houses and businesses had been allowed too close to the fence line. There was serious consideration of moving the Navy's East Coast master jet base to Florida, a prospect that would have hollowed Hampton Roads.

Navy officials aren't likely to welcome drilling in the Virginia Capes, especially after the military has warned repeatedly of the dangers, including in 2006:

"Any structures built in the water... would restrict where military air wings can fire their weapons, drive aircraft further away from the coast, increase fuel costs and wear and tear on the airframes, increase flight times en-route to training areas, and increase the risk to aircrews...."

No matter what great benefits proponents promise, the dangers are real: To Navy operations, to the environment, to the tourism industry, to commercial fishing.

The wealth that would make all that worth the risk disappears when examined.

There's no federal royalty scheme in place for East Coast drilling, so Virginia can't receive payments for transportation or education or to help support damaged industries in the event of a disaster. Endorsing drilling has also left the commonwealth with little leverage to change that. Or to change the map that allocates to Virginia a tiny slice of offshore territory.

None of these cautions is likely to deter drilling supporters, who've proven themselves willing to make the assumptions necessary to support the petroleum industry. Experience shows the dangers are more likely than 279,562 jobs.

The threats are greater than the promises that the Hampton Roads economy and environment won't be damaged by an industry with a long history of destruction.