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Our View: Drill here? Maybe. Drill now? That's impossible

Southern political leaders and the oil industry want to find out if there's enough oil and natural gas off the Atlantic coast to justify drilling for it.

That's a reasonable request that should be part of the country's energy plan.

What's not reasonable is some politicians' leap to the conclusion that offshore oil and gas will add immeasurably to southern states' economies, creating thousands of new jobs and scores of new onshore businesses. Nobody knows enough about what's under the Atlantic Ocean floor to make such an assertion.

Gov. Pat McCrory has long supported an "all of the above" energy strategy and has backed both drilling and wind farms off the North Carolina coast. The governor is vice chairman of the Outer Continental Shelf Governors Coalition, an eight-state group pressing Washington to open up more of the sea floor for oil and gas exploration.

There are plenty of "drill here, drill now" advocates in the General Assembly and they are in McCrory's corner - some of them well ahead of the governor, urging an irresponsible gold rush for a resource that may be real or may be illusory.

The truth is, we may drill here, but we won't drill now. We can't. If it happens at all, it may be several years before the oil industry gets approval to conduct the seismic testing that will reveal more conclusively whether there is enough petroleum out there to justify the billions of dollars in investment to extract it.

It's not just a matter of putting drilling platforms out in the Atlantic. There needs to be a network of undersea pipelines to send the oil and gas to shore, and then facilities along the coast to receive and refine the products. It will take a decade or two after drilling is approved before all that infrastructure is in place.

Meanwhile, not everyone is in favor of drilling. The Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico is still very much on regulators' and environmentalists' minds. It should be on the mind of anyone who wants to insure the future of our coastal tourism and fisheries industries. No offshore energy exploration should begin until safety issues are fully addressed - if indeed that is even possible.

Despite the pressure from the oil industry and politicians, there is no urgency here. In the past decade, America's energy fortunes have taken a sharp turn for the better - and away from the vise grip of OPEC. Domestic supplies of oil and natural gas are plentiful, thanks to new technology, and this country is on the verge of becoming a net exporter of gas.

There is no need to rush. And there is every reason to get it right, before the first drill bit hits the ocean floor.